

NELIBEWA IN TRANSITION:  
THE SPATIAL IMPACT OF THE TRANSFORMING GENDER ROLES IN RURAL SRI LANKA

A THESIS  
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## DEDICATION

To my father, who rooted a passion in me for stories

And

To my academic advisor for teaching me  
how to reap the academic fruits of my passion

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Behind this project were the most challenging years of my life. This thesis was developed as I grew into a politically and socially conscious person. The iconic guidance behind this development is my thesis advisor and mentor Professor Nihal Perera. I am Thankful for his time, guidance and the efforts in helping me grow both academically and personally. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. John West and Professor Eric Kelly for their valuable comments and insights.

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# CHAPTER 1

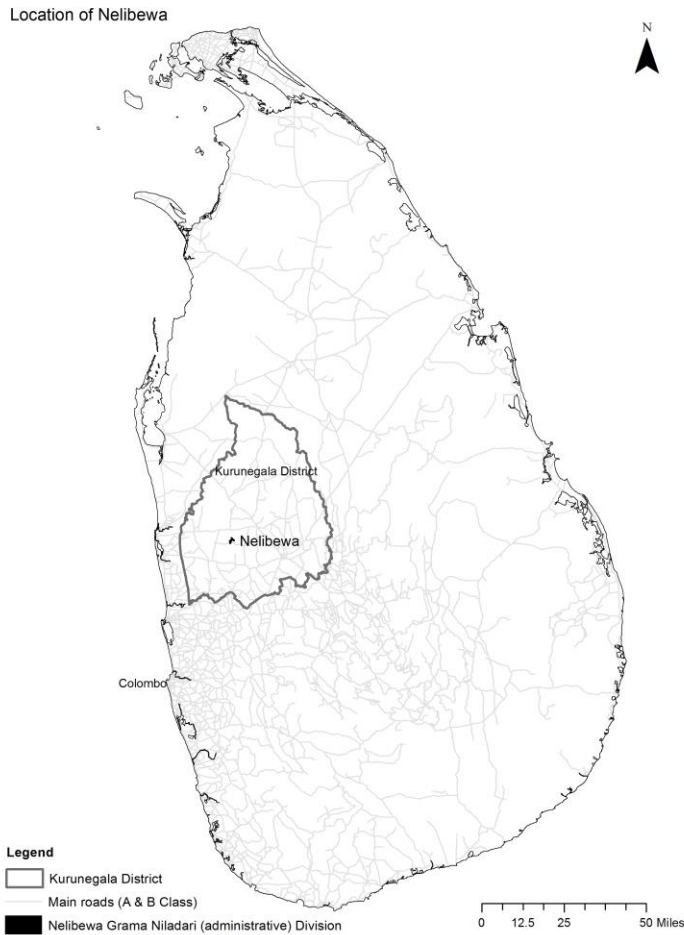
## INTRODUCTION

I was born into the gender discourse. Growing up as a girl in a rural village in Sri Lanka, the traditional notions of gender roles and stereotypes seemed the norm. It took many years of study outside the village, in different cultural backgrounds, and reading critical work in the areas of gender, feminism, anthropology and planning to realize the complexity of what I had understood as normal. I wish to continue this intellectual journey into exploring gender and space in my home village.

Nelibewa, where I was born and raised, is a village in the Northwestern Province of Sri Lanka, 100 km away from Colombo, the national capital. (Figure 1) There are 155 households in Nelibewa Grama Nilaadhari Division (the smallest administrative division) with about 570 people. More than half (fifty-two percent) of the population is female (see table 1). The land is largely used for coconut plantations and rice cultivation. (See Figure 2)

*Table 1: Demographic information of Nelibewa Grama Nildhari Division*

Demographic characteristics	Data
Population	570
Number of households	155
Female	296
Male	274
Number of women native to the village	70



*Figure 1: Location of Nelibewa*

Even though Nelibewa was not directly subjected to colonial or post-colonial changes, its social structures and spaces have been transforming. Nelibewa has been modernizing: Twenty years ago, as a child, I lived in a neighborhood in Nelibewa with only two brick houses. Today, all the houses in that neighborhood, Ambawatta, are built with bricks and eighty percent of them have baked-clay tiled roofs. The neighborhood did not have electricity, nor private wells or access roads; many people accessed their property across other people's private land. Today, every house has access to electricity and well water and there is an internal road network. This modernization is "locally defined" as argued by Nihal Perera and Gaurab Kc (2015). This locally-produced processe of development and modernization which is not caused directly by the state or capital should be investigated.

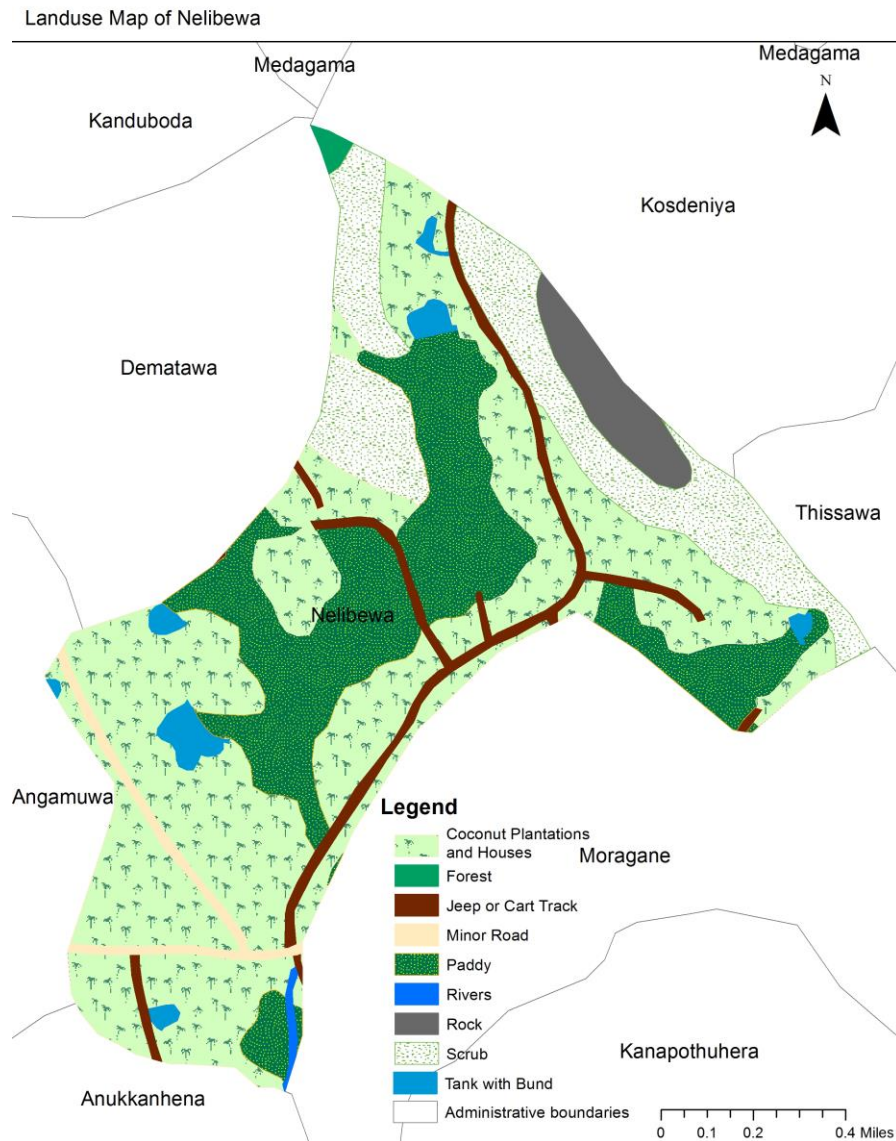


Figure 2: Landuse map of Nelibewa

Gender roles and relationships are also changing. I witnessed many women in Nelibewa becoming the breadwinners of their families and taking charge of their children's education. Although women are still considered inferior to men in many ways, they make major decisions pertaining to the wellbeing of their families and many provide financial support. These observations made me ask the relationship between gender roles and the larger patriarchal structures.

This research explores the accompanying transformations in the socio-spatial organization of the village. This study concerns the process of people's production of society and space, with special attention to women in Nelibewa who have been powerful agents in the process of modernization that happens continuously from within.

Gender studies and theories were developed in Western countries where the socio-cultural system has transformed from slavery to feudalism to capitalism. Socio-cultural systems that existed in Lankan kingdoms and in the village of Nelibewa were different to feudalism, defined by peasants and landlords. The socio-cultural system that existed in Lanka was different and had a different division of labor based on a caste system. Gender roles in Lanka cannot be understood without an intersectional evaluation of caste and gender. Women in different castes had different roles to play. Women in the elite class, which owned a large portion of the land in the village, did not get involved in farming or economic activities; women in the families of the same caste, but owning a small portion of land, or peasants, worked on farms supporting their families. Women in the linen-washing caste (*radha*) used to walk around the village, collecting linens, washing them and participating in all the functions of the village because they had special roles to play in weddings and *kotahalu magul* (girls' age attending ceremony). *Radha* women were the informal source of information to women in higher-castes, explained Soma, a village woman. Therefore, gender definitions and women's stories were different according to their caste and class. Nelibewa women had different levels of access to public spaces in the village also based on these factors.

Gender relationships and definitions are not only specific to localities, but are also very diverse within a local area; they are conditioned by other structures and relationships such as family, religion and caste. This intersectional understanding of gender relationships is very important to understanding spaces of gender. As the study demonstrates, women get different

levels of access to the socio-spatial structures and processes in the village depending on their caste, age, education and nativity.

## **Gender in Planning**

Physical planners shape space. Space cannot be separated from the social and cultural dynamics of the spaces. In Henri Lefebvre's (1991) words, space is a social relation. Spaces therefore do not remain abstract as planners draw and the state creates. They are negotiated, transformed, and lived by people who occupy and use them. Hence, there are many dynamics to consider when understanding a place and its planning process. Gender provides a crucial power dimension to spaces, thus shaping the function and meaning of a place. In short, understanding space requires the understanding of how gender shapes space and how space influences gender. Yet planners have fallen far short of addressing gender relations.

Planning scholars such as Gerda Wekerle (1980), Stimpson et al. (1981), Dolores Hayden (1981, 1984), Jacqueline Leavitt (1986), Cooper Marcus and Wendy Sarkissian (1986), Chant (1989), Daphne Spain (1992), Susan Fainstein and Lisa Servon (2005), Ananya Roy (2005), and Sylvia and Caroline Moser (2012) address issues of gender in planning. According to this literature, gender became a concern in planning related scholarship in the West in the 1980s, with the second wave of feminism that began in the 1960s. These planning scholars focus on the gendered spaces that are produced and maintained by planners and the government and how women's outdoor activities are limited, especially in (formal) public spaces. Women face many issues when using spaces and infrastructure.

According to the authors cited above, women are victims of this spatial design. The understanding they provide is limited to the predicament of women and why it is unjust. There is a lack of studies on how women use their agency in negotiating space. These authors hardly address how women negotiate existing spaces and spatial structures, producing "new" spaces

that could help fulfil their needs and wants. Hence the literature-at-large provides an outside-in view, and lacks the understanding of how women themselves respond to their predicaments.

Nihal Perera (2015) argues that “Despite the stronger control they enjoy, capital and the state are not the sole producers of space nor are the abstract spaces total and complete” (3). Ordinary people also engage in a continuous process of negotiating, creating and defining spaces they use every day. Specifically addressing women and space, he (Perera 2002; 2015) highlights that women –among other “people”-- hardly accept this victimhood caused by the extant patriarchal spatial structures, but exercise their agency in feminizing space. In regard to literature, he elaborates that knowledge on places and spaces that people produce is extremely limited and knowledge on spaces that women produce is even more limited. This is the main gap that this thesis intends to address.

## **Issue(s)**

The limited literature on gender in planning –highlighted above-- focuses on the issues that women face in using public spaces and infrastructure in cities. Taking a social justice point of view, they highlight the importance of providing women equal access to public spaces and assert that cities should be inclusive for all genders. The scholars urge to consider the special needs of women, to let them achieve the best social and economic life and to not deprive equal access based on their biological difference. The literature on gender and space goes beyond women to address the subjectivity of the LBGTQI people.

As highlighted by Perera (2002; 2015), women are not passive recipients and voluntary subjects of the spaces and the social structures that are provided for them, but they use their agency to create more favorable situations for themselves. Existing literature hardly acknowledges women’s agency in creating their own spaces.

Planners in Sri Lanka have not paid enough attention to understanding how people produce spaces; the knowledge of the gendered process of space production is even more limited; rural women are totally absent from the discourse. Hence the key question is, do women in Nelibewa accept extant spaces as given and become their subjects, or do they negotiate space for their wants and needs? If so, what kind of spaces do they produce? How does this gendered process of space-making transform the overall space of the village and the social structures, especially the patriarchy?

## **The Project**

This study addresses the above gap in existing literature on gender in planning and in planning practice. In this thesis, I examine how women have transformed gender roles and definitions in Nelibewa, from the grassroots level and how they have reshaped the spatial arrangement of the village at domestic and societal scales. I concentrate on how women use their agency to negotiate space within the patriarchal system in the village and its social and spatial implications.

This study investigates how women used education and employment opportunities, the introduction of Free Trade Zones (FTZ) in the 1970s with the opening of the economy in Sri Lanka, opportunities for work in the Middle East (1980 – to date), and the Civil War in Sri Lanka (1983-2009) to transform themselves. The study will further examine how and to what degree women's relative empowerment transformed the domestic and public spaces in the village.

Spatially, this study is about the *gama* in Sri Lanka. This Sinhala word is literally translated to English as the "village." In Sri Lankan minds, *gama* is also imbedded with traditional values. Due to the romantic and stereotyped use of the word *gama*, most government policy documents and reports use the term "rural areas" to refer to *gama*. Different authors have



used different terms like “village” (Gamburd, 2002, Gunasinghe, 1996, Edmund, 1961). Words similar to *gama* in sinhala include *grameeya*, *gammana*, and *gambada*. These nouns, adjectives and adverbs are used in different occasions. I use the term *gama* because the literal meaning of village, which is used with different meanings in various contexts, is not sufficient to understand the perceived spaces of the *gama*.

Sujeewa Hettithantri (2009) identifies *gama* as a social organization under transition. “Transition” is central to understanding the *gama*. He also refers to *gamas* as social units under transition: *sankranthi samaaja ekaka*, (Hettithantri, 2009). The study identifies the Sri Lankan village as a socio-spatial process that is under continuous transformation.

Nelibewa is not an isolated village, but a translocality (Appadurai, 2003), a locality that is connected to other locales, that both shapes and is shaped by other locales (Perera 2016). Its transformation occurs from within the *gama* by its own people, but the influences from the outside and the larger contexts have played significant roles. As my research reveals (See Chapter 4), women play a significant role in bringing new trends from other areas (within the nation and other countries) and negotiating them according to local values and constraints. As women try to open up room for their daily life by making slight adjustments to the socio-spatial organization of the village, the new “space” produces new aspirations and changes, causing substantial changes in the socio-spatial structure. This thesis focuses on the agency of women in transforming the society and space in Nelibewa.

*Gama*, in this thesis, refers to the perceived understanding of the socio-spatial unit that is under continuous transformation. As I study gender and space in *gama*, the study also investigates the village through the lens of gendered-production and transformation of spaces. For children in Nelibewa, “*gama*” refers to the mother’s home village, not to the father’s *gama* where they reside. I will not adopt this exotic usage in this work; I will identify women’s native villages literally as “women’s native village”. The transliteration of the term *gama*, i.e., the village

is also used interchangeably with *gama*. Towards the end of this thesis, different meanings that people give to *gama* are also discussed,

The study is highly pertinent: Planners pay more attention to issues in urban areas, but forget how spaces are produced and function on a daily-basis. The government and the planners --as the agents of government-- try to develop and provide solutions to rural issues without an understanding of local spaces and their transformation processes. Hence, it is highly important to develop knowledge of the rural areas. As highlighted above, there is little knowledge on gender relations in rural areas. Hence the study of gender relations and space in Nelibewa is highly important for spatial studies and planning.

## **Methodology**

Planners involve various methods and methodologies to understand space, such as census, questionnaire surveys, formal interviews, mapping and land surveys. However, most of these methodologies make the planners look at spaces from an outside-in perspective, thus “othering” the people who live and create these spaces. Most of the methods, tools, concepts and theories that planners employ to understand space are developed in the Western academy and are significantly insufficient to take account of local socio-cultural contexts. Investigating places using an outside-in view limits the vision of the researcher to the knowledge that they bring from outside; i.e. the knowledge they already have. When studying new communities and spaces, researchers have their own preconceptions and stereotypes . Even when developing questionnaires and conducting formal interviews, researchers cannot be completely free and objective. The nature and scope of the preconceived thoughts and questions depend on the knowledge that researchers already have. To address this limitation, it is important to involve inside-out (Perera, 2015) ethnographic study. This method does not assure that the study will

be totally free and objective. Yet, it gives a ground level perspective to the stories and acknowledges the subjectivities of the researcher, much more than what the outside-in studies based on existing statistics and maps provide.

The question is how to develop a more grounded understanding of the place and its people without bringing in preconceptions on the place based on our limited knowledge and experience. The first step is to understand the researcher's own biases and acknowledge them, and acknowledge that the researcher may have other biases that are not possible to perceive. Reflecting and questioning one's own standpoint/perceptions will help better understand the place without limiting the knowledge of it to what is already known.

For this thesis, I conducted ethnographic research in Nelibewa. As I am a member of the village and have strong connection to its socio spatial structure, this study also has a significant component of autoethnography (Neville-Jan, 2003; Modjeska, 2006; and Richardson, 2000b). Building on and questioning the biases of this autoethnography, I used informal interviews and cognitive maps to get people's stories and perspectives. This was a method to collect more information and to avoid subjectivity. Bringing up the old memories and incidents helped initiate casual conversations; then I let my respondents continue and detour the conversation as they preferred. This way, while I used my lived experience in order to connect with people, I was able to challenge my own views and develop a broader view of the village, its people, space, and gender politics. Monitoring the conversations while they took place and later, I built on the leads they provided, thus launching a snowballing effect.

There were few challenges caused by this process. First, I had to make sure that I did not stereotype people, their stories and perspectives with the knowledge I already have about them. Being their neighbor and having known them my entire life, I had to let the story evolve beyond the preconceived notions I had about them. I kept myself alert and conscious of my own stereotypes and preconceptions about the villagers, incidents and situations.

The most important step in ethnographic studies, i.e., the building of trust between the ethnographer and the respondents was already present. My respondents too were familiar with me and were already connected to me through shared memories and family relationships. They too had particular preconceptions of me developed through my family background, the village structure and national-scale stereotypes. Most of the villagers expressed how proud they are of me for being a college graduate and for my interest to write about the village. They believed that I already knew about the village; hence the villagers did not try to romanticize or exaggerate the stories. They even raised the question: "Why do you want to write about gender relations in the village?" Their ability to question me brought the villagers and me to a similar power level: We could question each other.

The second challenge is that, as I am a member of their community, they were not comfortable sharing some information with me. For an example, in Nelibewa, sexual relationships are not a subject that elders talk about with younger people. Villagers were not comfortable sharing their stories about gender relations as they perceptually connected it to sexual relationships. Villagers have a different language to talk about matters related to extramarital relationships, pre-marital sex and other matters related to sexuality. It was an advantage to be familiar with some of the "slang." Hence, I employed another method to get some information and stories that they were not comfortable sharing. I made phone calls from the USA to my respondents with whom I already had casual conversations during the 6 months of ethnographic study. This added some formality to our conversations and made them share the details of the stories that they were not comfortable sharing during face-to-face interviews in the village.

In order to address the main challenge of overcoming subjectivities that I could possibly hold as a part of the community, I also did a self-reflective analysis of my position as a subject of the research and also as the researcher. This self-evaluation will also help the reader to

understand my position and potential subjectivities. This discussion on the methodology is further elaborated below in regard to “bringing out people’s voices.”

### **Positioning Myself in the Research**

I lived in Nelibewa until I was 14 years old, and my parents moved out of the village in 2003 due to the poor infrastructure and services in our neighborhood, Ambawaththa. My father preferred to live close to his native village, so we did not move very far from Nelibewa. We moved to Weeragoda, a neighborhood adjacent to Nelibewa. Socially, we still belonged to Nelibewa. Although adjacent, these two neighborhoods are located within two Grama Niladhari (administrative) divisions and support two temples. Even after moving, our family continued its connections with Nelibewa through the temple and the village organizations. Our family continuously participated in the activities of village development committees, *shramadhana* (labor pooling events) and community events in Nelibewa, even after moving out. In effect, it was like we extended the village out with us instead of moving out to another village.

I am also a subject of my own research. My life is shaped and surrounded by the village, its gender definitions and stereotypes. I lived gendered practice on a daily basis. Most Sri Lankans celebrate girls’ puberty, so did my parents. Most of the villagers in Nelibewa spend their savings, even take loans, to throw a grand party to announce to everybody that their daughter had her first menstruation. Historically, this informed the world that she is ready for child bearing. It still says that the girl has become a woman.

The meaning of this event has changed over the time. According to some villagers, after 1970s, this ceremony was basically conducted to announce that the daughter is to be accepted as a woman and a “fragile object” protected by the society. Today, these parties (to celebrate the passage) happen as a tradition, to show off the wealth of the parents and to create an

occasion for the adults to party (at the expense of the girl). If a particular family does not announce, then other people would start questioning, in the form of gossip, whether the girl has gotten her first period yet or not and whether there is another bad reason for not celebrating.

The celebration of a woman's first period, commonly called *kotahalu magula* (age attending parties), is so common in Nelibewa that parents do not realize it is embarrassing for their daughters. When my parents threw my age-attending party, all the relatives and villagers came to me and informed me of things to do and not to do as a woman. My neighbor who had a son of my age said that I should not climb trees and play cricket after that day. He also advised me to stop riding bicycles. By the end of the party, I was tired of the list of the things that I should and should not do. My experience was not unique. My experience and my friends' stories made me realize that these parties are exhausting and embarrassing for girls, but this practice still continues today, as a time when formal gender roles are imposed upon girls.

Although my parents later realized that *kotahalu magula* is an embarrassing practice and also tried not to limit me within traditional gender roles, villagers never forgot to let me know when I did not behave like a "good woman". The knowledge I was exposed to in my childhood taught me that there are gendered roles in social spaces. Even at school which was a co-education institution, located five kilometers away from my *gama*, I experienced gendered norms. Mowing the garden, fixing a bulb, getting up on a desk to post something on a wall and lifting heavy desks and chairs in the classroom were considered boys' work, while sweeping the floor, decorating the classroom, making offerings to the Buddhist shrine and all the other "small tasks" were considered women's work. There were students who crossed these boundaries. In the village however, there is some blurriness to these gendered roles, but the definition of what is "normal" and given "gender roles" was central to the villagers' worldviews.

It has been a common practice in the village that men are served food first and women, especially mothers, have the leftovers. There was a saying that if boys ate the crust, the almost

inedible part from the pan used for boiling rice, their beards would not grow. It sounds like they will not become men. If someone has to eat the crust, it is a female. There is another saying that if a girl sweeps the compound after sunrise, she will marry an older man. Girls are supposed to wake up early, clean, and prepare the house and the environs for use during the day. These types of norms, promoted by beliefs and sayings, shape the superiority and authority of males and the subordinate and caretaker roles of females.

In my own home, the woman who looked after my brother until he was three years old said that I should respect my brother because he will grow up to be a man, although he is 10 years younger than me. She also said that I should not hit my brother because he is male. These beliefs were very powerful and hegemonic in creating gendered roles, power relations and male privilege. I grew up within and acquiring these beliefs.

Having baby boys is also preferred over having baby girls in Nelibewa. The same day my aunt gave birth to a baby girl for the second time, one of my relatives' cow gave birth to a male calf. When my cousin, whose mother gave birth to a baby girl, and I visited the calf, my uncle who owns the cow said "look, even my cow gave birth to a male. Your mother couldn't give birth to a boy for the second time". I was 12 years old and I said "I wish your cow gave birth to a female, so she can also give you calves and milk". My uncle got mad at me and complained to my mother that I was disrespectful.

My mother gave her first serious talk to me about gender roles and male privilege that day. She said that in the village, people, especially traditional villagers like my uncle believe that women are inferior to men. My mother also said that the reason she maintains a respected position in my father's extended family and the village is because she has a government job as a school teacher and she is financially independent. My mother often advised my cousins and me to get a good education and become financially independent. My mother strongly influenced the way I perceive gender roles.

My father worked in Colombo and came home only during weekends; hence my mother had to perform all the family duties, not just the typical “female roles”. When my father came home, he took over most of the duties at home and also helped my mother with household chores. He wanted to show his gratitude to my mother for taking care of the family in his absence, he said. Within this background, I observed gendered roles and male privilege in the village, but was also exposed to the blurry definitions of gender roles inside the family.

This conflicting background and the exposure to gender definitions and stereotypes helped me to develop a critical gender consciousness. Later, studying gender in urban planning and experiencing gender relationships and definitions in other cultures enabled me to reflect on and question gender relationships in my village. The exposure to the ideas of people’s spaces, especially the familiarization and feminization of space (Perera 2016), enabled me to see how women in Nelibewa use their agency to negotiate gender roles. This experience in the village and academy provided a strong entry point to this study of how women in Nelibewa negotiate and construct domestic and public spaces.

## **Bringing Out People’s Voices**

Quantitative surveys and map analysis employed in most planning research are based on existing knowledge. These researchers count heads, explore large areas on maps, and generalize findings. This type of abstract analysis does not provide sufficient room for people’s voices within research; instead it makes people passive subjects. When research is structured to validate a hypothesis, or achieve a vision, the scope of the research is clearly defined at the beginning.

In this ethnographic study, I followed a method similar to the planning tactic referred to in “The Science of Muddling Through” (Lindblom, 1959). Instead of following a set questionnaire



full of preconceived notions, I focused on everyday stories of people in the village and allowed the story and my questions to grow. Hence, I began analyzing what people said and asked new questions, letting the research branch off into new areas, especially to areas that I had not thought of before. This method combined the branch method (Ibid) with snowballing research, which let the discovery evolve naturally with neither trying to fit the knowledge to the already developed framework, nor forcing it to branch out.. Yet, in view of developing knowledge and providing some depth to the study, I also focused my study and scoped it to particular areas, while still incorporating new themes and areas of investigation.

This ethnographic study is developed to acknowledge the voices of rural people, especially women, in Sri Lanka and bring their stories to the circulation and critique in our academic discourses. Other than the literature written about the *gama*, people's stories from the village are not included in mainstream history of Sri Lanka and most other countries. The voices of subalterns (Gramsci, 1948, Guha, 1986, and Spivak, 1988) are not heard in planning. In her seminal work, Gayatri Spivak argues that the subalterns cannot speak (1988). When a subaltern gets the privilege to speak, he/she already loses his/her subaltern status. Lately, many scholars including Spivak (1997), argue that subaltern voices can be represented as in the *Breast Stories* (Devi, 1997).

Spivak writes: "The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (1988, 306). It is this role (among others) that I perform through this thesis. This thesis tells stories of Nelibewa villagers and provides a representation through my own analysis of how women in Nelibewa produce spaces through social organization and daily negotiations.

In the next (second) chapter, I discuss the existing literature on gender in planning discourses, social production of space, womanhood in Sri Lanka and colonial and post-colonial shaping of the womanhood. In so doing, I observe the gaps in existing literature on the spaces

that women produce. Gender is a rare topic in spatial planning, but even the limited literature on gender in planning discusses how gendered the spaces are and the issues that women face in these gendered spaces. Daphne Spain (1992), Shilpa Phadke et al (2011) and Dolores Hayden (2005) discuss how spaces are planned for the generic user who is male and how women face obstacles in urban spaces. This discussion is highly important in planning in order to make cities inclusive for all citizens no matter their gender. Nihal Perera (2002; 2016) writes that ordinary people are not passive recipients of the spaces provided by the professionals and governments, but they also alter, transform, negotiate, and create spaces for their daily activities and cultural practices. Existing literature on gender in planning mostly focuses on the gendered spaces and the issues women face at the public spaces. Building on this, the chapter highlights where the knowledge produced in this research fits in the interdisciplinary academic discourse of gender and planning.

The third chapter discusses the socio-cultural organization of the village, patriarchy as hegemony, and how women use their agency to survive in a patriarchal system and landscape. In so doing, I focus on how women transform the extant gendered social and spatial structures. Particularly significant is the spatial impacts of the transformation of gender roles in domestic and public spaces, and the concurrent changes in spatial structures of the village.

The key chapter (fourth) investigates how Nelibewa women employ global and national level socio-economic changes to transforming their roles from housewives to working women. Here, I focus on how they do the same by selling their labor both in the sphere of reproduction and the production sphere, improving their position within the patriarchy, somewhat weakening the structure. The war too has enabled women to develop cultural capital.

The final chapter concludes the study. It emphasizes the incompleteness of larger structures such as patriarchy, Western feminism and capitalism, in order to identify the production and transformation of local gender roles and their influence on transforming spaces.

This chapter summarizes how women use their agency to produce, change, hybridize, transform, and modernize the socio-spatial organization in Nelibewa.

## CHAPTER 2

### GENDER IN PLANNING, GENDER IN SRI LANKA AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

#### Gender in Planning

If they want to eliminate gender discrimination in space, planners have to understand the genderedness of space. Gender roles are always in a process of redefining and changing.

Fainstein and Servon argue;

Gender has to do with socially constructed notions about appropriate roles and behaviors for men and women, but these roles change over time. Gender roles and dynamics shift to accommodate changing socio economic needs while still maintaining existing power structures (2005, p.3).

In the West, gender became a popular topic among urban planners with the second wave of feminism in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Literature on gender in urban planning focuses on gender discrimination in urban areas, gendered spaces and how to consider gender in planning and development (Dolores Hayden (1981, 1984, 2005), Daphne Spain (1992), Susan Fainstein and Lisa Servon (2005), Shilpa Phadke et al (2005)). This thesis pays more attention to how women struggle to empower themselves and the spatial constitution of these struggles and their outcomes.

Most gender studies in Western countries are based in urban areas. This chapter will review existing literature, but will provide the background understanding on womanhood and how gender relationships maybe significant for rural Sri Lanka. This contextual chapter explores

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<sup>1</sup> The first wave of feminism began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing more on legal issues such as women's right to vote and property rights. The second wave of feminism began in the early 1960s and focused in to a broader range of rights for women and gender equity. Professionals including urbanists, urban geographers and planners intersected feminism to their deciplines.

how women have used post-colonial socio-economic changes to transform gender relationships to further empower themselves and make more inclusive spaces.

In particular, this is a study of how the transformation of gender relationships shapes the post-colonial village of Nelibewa. Hence, beyond the general review of literature on gender relations, I examine the scholarship on gender, gendered space, gender roles, social production of spaces and gender in Sri Lankan villages. Within a general overview of womanhood and gender relationships, I focus on the present, but with particular reference to colonial and nationalist notions of creating a new womanhood in Sri Lanka.

As this thesis concerns the production and negotiation of space, I base my study on the literature on this subject. Here I particularly refer to Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1973), and the like. I will also build my work on the extension of this work to Sri Lanka and the areas of lived spaces by Nihal Perera (2015). Using the latter, I will focus on how women in Nelibewa are constructing spaces for their own needs and wants, or feminizing space (Perera, 2015), somewhat empowering their position within the village.

In short, the following discussion highlights the importance of understanding gender relationships and how they are spatially produced, how they produce space and the importance of understanding the production of space by ordinary women in planning. In so doing, I will highlight that, although the colonial construction of gender roles still continues, they are also changed and redefined by women, particularly within the socio-economic environment that developed during last few decades in Sri Lanka.

## **Social Processes and Space**

Citing David Harvey (1973), Daphne Spain (1992, 6) points that “space and social relations are so intricately linked that the two concepts should be considered complementary instead of mutually exclusive and once spatial forms are created, they tend to become

institutionalized and in some ways influence future social processes.” Hence urban forms and social spaces represent the particular social processes that create them (Harvey, 1973; Spain, 1992).

David Harvey (1973) argues that space is a social relation. Spain (1992, p. 6) also highlights the converse concept of spatial fetishism: A “social structure is determined by spatial relations” (Massey 1954b, 53). She (Spain 1992, p. 6) thus interprets that the organization of space is “both the product and the producer” of existing political-economic relations: spatial representations are expressed in their own logic, i.e., the power relations between different groups. Spatial relations are therefore active instruments in the production and reproduction of the social order (Moore 1986, 89). Nihal Perera (1999, p. 1-2) argues that “Space is a constituent part of the polities, economies, and cultures in a society, if not on a one-to-one basis; it is conditioned by them and, at the same time, conditions them.”

In regard to gender, Phadke, Khan, and Ranade write that “spaces are not given but constructed” (2011, p. 66). Perera explains “that our knowledge of the spaces ordinary people produce for and through their everyday activities and cultural practices is minimal” (2015, p. 1). Planning scholars have even less knowledge of spaces produced by women.

## **Gender and Space**

The everyday spaces in our lives are not free from gender. Phadke, Khan, and Ranade clarify “space is not a neutral void to be filled up but is differently defined by the various people who inhabit it. This means men and women experience it in different ways, making any given space integrally gendered” (2011, p. 66). They argue that

“across geography and time, men and women do not have the same kind of access to space, nor do they use it in quite the same way. Further constructions of gendered space are not the same everywhere and they also change over time. (2011, p. 66)

The first step of understanding gender is to differentiate it from sex, the biological difference. Susan Fainstein and Lisa Servon (2005, p. 3) clarify that sex has to do with biology, while gender “refers to the associations, stereotypes, and social patterns that a culture constructs on the basis of actual or perceived differences between men and women (Nelson, 1995, p. 132)”. Spain explains that “a variety of cultural, religious and ideological reasons have been used throughout history to justify gender segregation” (1992, p.39). These cultural and ideological reasons are different in local areas and require careful attention in understanding the construction of gender relations and stratifications in different localities.

At the end of the second wave of feminism in the 1980s, urban planners began to discuss gender discrimination, women’s rights and the importance of gender in planning. Leonie Sandercock and Ann Forsyth highlight that Leavitt (1986), Wekerle (1980), Hayden (1981, 1984), Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian (1986), and Stimpson et al. (1981) write about the importance of gender as a focus in planning practice. Planning is defined by the American Planning Association (APA website, 2015) as “a dynamic profession that works to improve the welfare of people and their communities by creating more convenient, equitable, healthful, efficient, and attractive places for present and future generations”. The key questions are: Are places that planners create similarly convenient, healthful, efficient, attractive and equitable for all genders? Do women face more issues in accessing places and infrastructure that planners create simply because they are women?

Leavitt (1986, p. 181) has pointed out that “women face problems of such significance in cities and society that gender can no longer be ignored in planning practice.” Sandercock and Forsyth (2005, p. 51) highlight that

Gender issues emerge in each of the three approaches and take the form of such themes as the economic status of women, the location and movement of women through the built environment, the connections between capitalist production and patriarchal relationships and between public and domestic life, how women know about the world and what is good, and the forms of communication with which women are most comfortable or by which they are most threatened. An awareness of these issues is lacking in planning theory

Dolores Hayden (2005) emphasizes the importance of physical, social, and economic design of a human settlement that would support, rather than restrict, the activities of employed women and their families.

Further interrogating planning, Phadke, Khan, and Ranade (2011, p. 66) suggest that “Public space and infrastructure are usually designed for an abstract generic user. In the context of an ideology that deems women’s proper place is at home, the assumed ‘neutral user’ of public facilities and infrastructure is invariably male” Yet, citing Daniels (1975), Spain (1992 p. 343) observes that “space [is] often ... taken for granted or ignored, and not solely by theorists. Those who benefit from existing arrangements are particularly prone to this blind spot”. She refers to the hierarchies of space and how the privileged may not see their position within it. Public spaces are used by men and are restricted for girls by their own parents and/or the elders.

## **Gender as a Social Process**

Sherry Ortner (1974) explains in more general terms that the “Reproductive roles of women in the family create archetypes of gender relations outside the family” (Spain, 1992, p. 23). Further, Brinton (1988) highlights the systematic nature of gender stratification caused by the interplay of social institutions like family and religion (cited in Spain, 1992, p. 23). Hiller and Hanson (1984) state:

Space outside the home becomes the arena in which social relations (i.e., status) are produced while the space inside the home becomes that in which social relations are reproduced. Gender- status distinctions therefore are played out within the home as well as outside of it (cited in Spain, 1992, p.7).

Therefore, gender is produced in public space as a social function, but it is redefined and passed down over generations within the family.



Spain (1992) describes space as organized in ways that reproduce gender relations in regard to power and privilege. Status is embedded in spatial arrangements, so changing space potentially challenges the status hierarchy, and changing status potentially challenges spatial institutions. Spain further argues that initial differences between women and men create certain types of gendered spaces and that institutionalized spatial segregation then reinforces prevailing male advantages (1992, p.26).

### **Understanding “Gender” Locally**

As the above discussion demonstrates, it is important to understand gender as a social process which shapes the socio-spatial form and gets shaped by it. Nevertheless, definitions of gender and gender relationships are different from society to society and place to place. In Sri Lankan villages, the most common gathering place is the *handiya*: As Nihal Perera and Nirmani Liyanage observe “*handiya* is gendered: Women try to avoid the bar, the three-wheeler park, the betting center, and odd gathering places.” (2016, p. 211) Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, Shilpa Ranade argue that exclusion of women in public spaces “operates in complex ways so that different women have differential access to public space. Older women may have greater access to public space than younger women. Women may have access to certain public spaces in the day time but not at night” (2011, p. 66).

Leonie Sandercock and Ann Forsyth propose that “Contemporary Western feminism emerged from a particular urban form” (2005, p. 68). Hence the question is whether the gender experience in urban spaces in the Western world can be generalized to the rest of the world; in particular, whether we can understand the post-colonial spaces using Western feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) argues that there is no singular category as ‘the Third World woman’ but women are in different complexities like class, caste, age and level of education, although the feminism put all the third world women in one category. She further writes that “it is

possible to trace a coherence of *effects* resulting from the implicit assumption of ‘the west’ as the primary referent in theory and praxis” (2003, p. 196).

It is a challenging task to use the knowledge of Western feminist geographers, planners, and other scholars to understand womanhood, gendered spaces and gender in planning in a post-colonial setting, where both the indigenous and colonial value systems contribute to shape womanhood as well as the spatial structures which are dialectically shaping and defining each other. Hence, understanding gender as a social process which shapes and gets shaped by space should be done in the local context with very careful involvement of theories in gender and planning.

## **Contemporary Gender Roles and Womanhood as a Colonial Construction**

Although more women are joining the labor force, marriage and biological roles have hindered women’s socio-economic roles. This section investigates how gender relationships in Sri Lanka are influenced by colonization. I will discuss the pre-colonial notion about womanhood and gender relationships and how it was influenced by colonial values in constructing post-colonial womanhood and gender relationships.

In order to address the issue concerning gendered spaces, discrimination, and to understand the gendered process of space production, it is essential to understand gender as a social relation and how it is constructed and transformed in Sri Lanka. In contemporary Sri Lanka, women are free to pursue higher education and have access to health facilities. The *Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI)*<sup>2</sup> Sri Lanka hails women’s status:

Educational opportunities for women [in Sri Lanka] are excellent, though there are considerable gender barriers to female engagement in society and economy. Low child mortality and high female higher education levels have not translated into greater equity in economic participation and more decision-making power for women.

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<sup>2</sup> BTI analyzes transformation processes towards democracy and a market economy in 129 developing and transition countries

Yet only thirty-six percent of working age women are employed in Sri Lanka. This number rises to seventy five percent among men (Census and Statistics Department Sri Lanka 2013). Most of the educated young women are simply domesticated with household chores and childcare.

Anne McClintock (1992, p. 92) writes:

the global militarization of masculinity and the feminization of poverty have thus ensured that women and men do not live 'post-coloniality' in the same way, or share the same singular 'post-colonial condition'. If achieving independence is about resettling or dismantling the power, it has neither empowered both men and women equally nor advanced the lives of women in postcolonial setting.

Independence transferred power from white, male colonizers to brown, colonized men. Gender roles changed due to colonial value systems, including legal systems. Colonialism has not only been political and economic, but also a social and cultural process. Perera (1999) argues that, during colonialism, "In addition to establishing political domination and economic command, the core European states also constructed a privileged position for the knowledge, cultural systems, and worldviews that they were simultaneously developing" (p. 61). As colonialism transformed the culture and value systems in the colony, the colonized began to believe and respect the new value system.

Colonial writings about Sinhala-Buddhist women show a clear difference between local practices of gender relationships that existed during that time and the ideal roles that were described in historical texts from early centuries, or what is believed today to be traditional gender relationships or womanhood. Elizabeth J. Harris (2001) discusses women in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sri Lanka by critically analyzing colonial writings about local women. She mainly focuses on the freedom of marriage and economic freedom among Sinhalese women. She further discusses the appearance and the way these women dressed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Harris

(2001) brings up William Knighton<sup>3</sup> (1854, p. 37-38) who wrote that “I do not believe it would be possible for female humanity to dress itself more unbecomingly than the majority of Singhalese do.” Joseph Joinville<sup>4</sup> (1803, p. 429) wrote about the Singhalese women’s dress that “The women of lower orders wear petticoat of white cloth, which, passing between their legs, is thrown over the right shoulder, and fastened to the ligature about the waist” (cited in Harris, 2001). Today, the villagers believe that covering the waist is a must to represent women’s chastity. This change of view on dress code and chastity elaborates how the colonial value systems are embedded in local culture.

However, information about women was largely limited to those in the colonial capital of Colombo, coastal cities and the last local citadel of Kandy where the plantation economy was established later. This leaves open the possibility that there were different dressing patterns in other (remote) parts of the island. This is instigated by the fact that the way of dressing in pre-colonial rural areas and the current attitude of people about women’s dresses reveal how the colonial values are integrated into the local value system. British, especially the missionaries, saw these women as dressing very unappealing and tried to civilize them. Harris explains that “within Victorian stereotypes of woman ... wife and mother was the attribute of superior moral purity and religiousness” (2001, p. 36). This view is clearly visible in today’s Sinhalese society. Sasanka Perera argues that women are considered a cultural archive in today’s Sinhalese society (1997, p. 7).

The marriage bond and chastity is another big issue that the colonizers and the missionaries influenced. Joseph Joinville (1803) mentions “the existence of polyandry in Sri Lanka, declared that prostitution was permitted and respected, and claimed that divorce could

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<sup>3</sup> “William Knighton arrived in Sri Lanka in 1843, barely twenty years old as headmaster of the Normal Seminary in Colombo, established to train teachers for appointment to vernacular schools. He soon resigned and turned to coffee planting in the Kandy district” (Harris E. J., 2001, 60).

<sup>4</sup> A civil servant at the very beginning of British rule (Harris E. J., 2001, 12).

take place at the will of either party” (cited in Harris, 2001, p. 16). The freedom of marriage and the different family structures that existed in Lanka before the colonization was highly criticized by the colonizers. However, Harris (2001) argues that the freedom of marriage gave women a position where they could claim more rights and colonizers continuously perceived this freedom as an uncivilized practice.

Determination of women’s position in the society and their rights can be found in the traditional common laws that existed in Lanka, as it was called before colonization. Suleri (1992, p. 766) highlights the importance of analyzing the legal systems to understand gender relationships and women’s rights. These common laws consisted of both marriage and property laws, which ensured women’s rights and hence described the type of gender relationships and womanhood. Hewamanne describes that “Women inherited their parent’s property equally with their brothers and did not have to relinquish their claims at the time of marriage” (2008, p. 25).

According to Nihal Perera, the choices available within Lankan gender relationships were broad (1999, p. 49). Harris writes that there were two types of marriage systems according to Kandyan common law, the *Niti Niggahanduwa: Diga* (patrilocal) marriages where the wife lives with the husband’s family and *binna* (matrilocal) marriages where the husband lives with the wife’s family. The Kandyan law also allowed both Polyandry and Polygamy (2001 p. 20).

It is important to see how different marriage systems affected the women’s role in Sri Lanka because that eventually affects women’s power, particularly in family matters and in engaging in public spaces. For example, *binna* marriages gave more power to the woman. Martin Whyte (1978a) argues that “there have been conflicting interpretations of the effects of post marital residence and type of descent on women’s status” (cited in Spain, 1992, p. 22). Blumberg’s idea (1984) is that

generally matrilineal descent and matrilocal residence are associated with higher status for women since the bride continues to live near her female kin, who can provide economic and political support. Patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence require the

woman to move to her husband's kin group after marriage, thus allowing men to appropriate women's labor and solidify male dominance (cited in, Spain, 1992, p. 22).

Patrilocal residences are common in contemporary Sri Lanka and women have to live and adapt according to the cultural values of the husband's family and the village.

Divorce and dowry are two other topics that come up with marriage laws and women's rights. Harris (2001) argues that women had more freedom to get a divorce.

This independence was available for both parties. The loss of virginity in women was less of a taboo than today and a loose form of trial marriage was common (Perera 2015, p. 49). Further, Hewamanne points out that if a woman wanted to divorce her husband, she was entitled to take back her dowry, a provision that her British counterparts did not enjoy (2008, p.25). The right to ask for the dowry back helped raise the position of women.

In pre-colonial Lanka, dowry is something that both men and women used to provide based on the type of the marriage. According to Perera,

Unlike the situations of the orphans of the king or of women in many parts of South Asia, dowry was not a way of "bribing" a man to marry a woman, but a way of substituting immoveable rights to land for movable property in a society in which land was not commodified (Perera 2015, 49).

Whoever moved out from the parental village took their share of property from their parents in the form of movable property. In post-colonial Sri Lanka, dowry has taken different meanings, and these changes show the same in gender relationships and women's ideas about their independence. I will explore this process and its spatial implications further in the field.

The Dutch believed that this marital system and property laws in Ceylon are not civilized. Kumari Jayawardena (1992) writes that "Dutch colonialism transformed these relationships, displacing the older system with the patriarchal Roman-Dutch legal system and enforcing new marriage and inheritance laws" (cited in Perera 1999, p. 49). Even today the legal system introduced by colonial authorities is in practice with some amendments. Now it is not just a legal system, but people believe it as the tradition and more powerful and hegemonic than the legal system. There is a saying in Sinhala that *deega giya ganita gama ne* (a married woman does

not belong to her parent's village; i.e., married women (settled in husbands' villages) do not inherit their parents' properties. This was the rule and culture introduced by the colonizers.

However, Harris argues that

"in Sinhala tradition also, women were considered as preservers of the culture, and colonialism, of course, thrust new influences into this situation, through education for girls and Western role models provided by the wives of missionaries and women educationalists" (2001, p. 38).

These acts created a group of middle class women and men who mimicked colonial values. Anti-colonialists were against such mimicking. Ever since the revival of Buddhism in the late-nineteenth century, anti-colonialism also included disciplining women. Newspaper article, *Kawata Katikaya* (1 July 1876) published that women were encultured in foreign cultural traditions (cited in Perera, 1997). Sasanka Perera (cited as S.Perera) writes that "in addition to foreigners and Christians, women were also constantly seen as agents of negative social change and cultural deterioration" by anti-colonial leaders in Sri Lanka.

Despite the position given in the Sinhalese society as the repository of culture, there is a saying *ganunge nuwana handi mite digai* (women's intelligence is only at the length of the kitchen spoon). This shows how women were separated from knowledge in the Sri Lankan society. According to Sasanka Perera (1997), most of the time, women were criticized for not being conversant in Sinhala language and having uncultured children.

Sasanka Perera writes that even in most progressive institutions in contemporary Sri Lanka, women are not considered as responsible personalities to take important and top rank positions (1997). As a country boasting to have had the first female head of state in the modern world in 1960, this gender discrimination is lamentable. It is hard for a recently married woman to get a job in Sri Lanka and the reason given by many employers is as sexist as she could get pregnant at any time.

The women's occupation of household space has left public spaces for men. Lampher (1987) writes: "Cooking, cleaning, and childcare-- the "messiness" of daily life that exposes

women to continuous interruptions – have been proposed as one reason women occupy the private sphere while men dominate the public arena” (cited in Spain, 1992,p. 22). It is no different in the country that boasts to have had the first female head of state in the modern world. The above division of labor has reinforced the assignment of domestic and public spaces for female and male and the gender division and discrimination that comes with it.

From a global perspective, the shift from a self-sufficient, non-industrial society to a part of a “single world economy” during the colonial period, as spelled out by Perera (1999), using the World Systems Perspective (Wallerstein,1974), changed gender relationships by giving priority to men in the labor force and women as their companions. Rae Lesser Blumberg (1978) specifies the control of the means of production and the allocation of the surplus as more important to women’s status than the contribution to production. She identifies economic power as most important for women as it influences such life options as sexual freedom, marriage and divorce rights, and household authority. Gerhard Lenski (1996) argues that “Non-industrial societies show a decided lack of gender variance on traditionally masculine indicators of status such as positions of power or force” (cited in Spain, 1992, p. 22).

### **Doubling the Work Load for Women**

Historically, Sri Lanka had been an agricultural society with self-sufficient villages. Harris pinpoints that “British perspectives stressed that women in rural Sri Lanka were subject to a considerable burden of work both in the family and in the fields. The important question is whether this could be seen as exploitation or economic freedom” (2001, p. 47). Even today, when a woman works outside the house, contributes to the production and gains more power in resource allocation within the family, she has to double her work load as discussed in chapter 4. For Dolores Hayden the “Problem is paradoxical: women cannot improve their status in the home unless their overall economic position in society is altered; women cannot improve their



status in the paid labor force unless their domestic responsibilities are altered” (2005, p. 51). She suggests that “a program to achieve economic and environmental justice for women requires, by definition, a solution which overcomes the traditional division between the household and the market economy” (2005, p. 51). However, the definitions of gender roles were blurry in non-industrial societies.

Coltrane (1988) observes that “non-industrial societies in which fathers are regularly involved in domestic life and spend time with children are less rigidly stratified by gender than societies with absent fathers” (cited in Daphne Spain, 1992, p. 22). I do not argue that the woman’s position in the pre-colonial era was ideal for women, but women had more freedom than within the post-colonial definition of womanhood in Sri Lanka. As colonialism incorporated colonies into a “world system” (Wallerstein, 1974), the self-sufficient economy was challenged and the society and time were compartmentalized (Perera 1999). Men began to work in urban areas (in cities or nearby urban centers) or externally specified “jobs” within villages. Women’s roles were limited to domestic space and they turned into a more dependent group with their children.

Among Sri Lankan women, those in the middle class were the first exposed to the colonial education system which was influenced by Christianity. Colonial education for women was begun by missionaries. British Missionary James Selterk wrote that “Buddhist temples were the only places to obtain education and they were only opened for boys” (cited in Harris, E.J, 2001, p.25). Most missionary schools taught girls to be good mothers and housewives (Ibid). Selterk argues that literacy was the measurement of women’s education, which was not the measure prior to colonialism (cited in Harris, 2001). Although established to create a better position for Singhalese-Buddhist women, Buddhist girls’ schools also followed the British curriculum and educational methods. Later, the (British-influenced) public-school system was expanded across the country, also into rural areas (Perera, 2015). The colonial legal system on marriage, divorce and property rights changed the position of women in Sri Lanka and the

changes in economy and education system helped to change the mindsets, shape gender relationships, and define women's roles from within local value systems. In similar ways, anti-colonial/ nationalist attempts to create the ideal woman also caused many changes in the role and identity of local women in Sri Lanka.

Perera cites Sinhala newspaper articles in the decade of independence to demonstrate the continuous struggle of the nationalists to teach so-called Sinhala-Buddhist cultural identity to women (1997, p. 8- 9). Hewamanne highlights how Sri Lankan elite nationalist men created a "new woman" in Sri Lanka as a protest to colonial men (2008, p. 28). Gananath Obeyesekere (1970) terms this new value system Protestantization of Buddhism because it was formed as part of the protests against colonialism and Christianity during which some aspects of the new ideology were modeled on protestant moral codes. Hewamanne further explains that "gendered labor division and the notion that the middle class woman should be protected within a family environment was constructed by this admixture of Victorian moral system" (2008, p. 29).

In their struggle against colonialism, particularly Christianity, the new Sinhala elite men tried to form the ideal Sinhala-Buddhist womanhood using tradition. They referred to traditional Buddhist texts which are not directly from Buddha's teachings. They followed Brahmin texts from India to build the role of the ideal Sinhala Buddhist woman. For example, not all the women in Sri Lanka covered their upper body in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Knox, 1681), but the nationalists could not accept this. They tried to dress Sri Lankan women by conforming to Victorian ideals and the "ideal Kandyan woman" described in traditional texts. Vimaladharma used *Kawyashekaraya* which was written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Buddhists following Brahmin texts to describe, rather adopt into writings, the ideal Kandyan woman who covered herself with elegant clothes and was very "modest" (2003, p. 93-96).

This construction of the ideal woman, her role, and gender stratification was not only socio-cultural but was spatially constituted. Women were domesticated and cities became predominantly men's places. However, that does not mean that rural areas became women's

places. It requires further investigation on how the most powerful institutions and public spaces in rural areas were also dominated by men.

## Gender in Rural Sri Lanka

Spaces in Sri Lankan villages also are affected by colonial knowledge, cultural systems, and worldviews; these have shaped the gender roles. However, the definitions developed in the late-colonial period are also changing, redefining with time. Studies on Sri Lankan villages are limited and mostly abstract. The Sri Lankan village, mostly referred to as *gama*, has always been romanticized in literature and media. This beauty is represented in the following poem by Sagara Palansooriya (1948)

*goda mada dekama saru saaraya palabaraya*  
(Both paddy and land cultivations are prosperous)  
*katuroda gammaana tharamaka pitisaraya*  
(In this village named Katuroda which is a bit rural)  
*e gama madin galanaa ganga manaharaya*  
(The river that flows across this village is splendid)  
*kadamandiya pihitiye gama kelawaraya*  
(the shops were located at a corner of this village)

Most of the village development programs (*Gama neguma, Eka gamakata eka wedak*) identify rural areas or villages by the Pradeshiya Sabha (Provincial Council) administrative areas. According to this common definition used in government projects, rural population is the number of people who live in Pradeshiya Sabha areas. Population in urban council and municipal council areas are classified as urban. Employing this basic classification, Jayadeva Uyangoda et. al. (2009) estimate the rural population in Sri Lanka as eighty percent of the national population, living in about 25,000 villages.

According to Sujeewa Hettithantri (2009), the “traditional society” of the village no longer exists. Therefore, he identifies the village as a “social unit in transition”. Hettithantri (2009) further argues that the ideal Sinhalese-Buddhist villages never existed. It is an abstract creation that dialectically defined the urban, making the rural its Other.

Colonial writings on the Sri Lankan village discussed above also describe and shape women's roles and gender relationships in *gama* to some extent. Yet, there are no substantial academic writings about the gender relationships in Sri Lankan villages, their transformation and its impact on the village. Edmund Leach (1961) has explored land tenure and kinship in a Sri Lankan village and Newton Gunasinghe (cited in Sasanka Perera 1996) writes about the caste, class and socio-economic dynamics of select mid-country Sri Lankan villages. There are no deep studies of women in villages. Gamburd, 2002; Hewamanne, 2008 & 2016; Hyndman & De Alwis, 2003 inform us about related subjects and gender in villages, providing a strong point of departure for the current study.

## **Major Socio-economic Events Affecting Women's Role in Post-colonial Sri Lanka**

In Sri Lanka, the opening of Free Trade Zones (FTZs), the opening of employment opportunities abroad, and the civil war (1983-2009) are three major social changes that have affected gender roles and relationships. This section will review the literature on these larger changes and their impact on women. It will thus highlight the areas that need more in-depth research and fieldwork, which were carried out as part of this project. The discussion of fieldwork is found in Chapter 4.

### **Free Trade Zones**

After opening up Sri Lanka's economy in 1977, the government introduced Free Trade Zones. *Dabindu* collective in 1997 mentioned "Garment factories, which constitute the majority of all the industries within the FTZ, recruit large numbers of young rural women from economically and socially marginalized groups to work as machine operators" (in Hewamanne , 2008, p. 11).

The effect of global capitalism on the lives of ordinary women, their gender roles, and the creation of new social spaces for women in Free Trade Zones (FTZ) is discussed by Hewamanne (2008). The discussion is based on an in-depth ethnographic research of several years. Hewamanne highlights that “in FTZ rural women encountered new global cultural flows and acquired new knowledge” (2008, p. 13). She further argues that parents and neighbors focused on the economic benefits of the employers, while politicians and officials concentrated on benefits in terms of development, progress and modernity. It is pertinent to study how the knowledge that women obtained through FTZ, as well as the perspectives of family, neighbors, politicians and other involved parties brought about a change in the woman’s role within both the family and the village.

## **Migrant Housemaids**

Michele Gamburd (2002) writes that, beginning in 1976, streams of Sri Lankans migrated for work in the Gulf States. They were paid in the Middle East for the same household chores they did in their own homes. Yet “women’s migration affects the international division of labor, Sri Lanka’s national economy, the meaning of women’s work, and social relations such as family structures, caste stratification, class hierarchies, and gender roles” (Gamburd. 2002, p. 5). Women began to migrate as housemaids to these Middle Eastern countries, where the remittances of migrant workers equaled up to eight percent of the GDP (*Daily News*, 2011).

Gamburd (2002) further demonstrates how women’s power positions changed in the family as well as in the village. They were able to argue and interact with money lenders and shop owners in the village in a new way. Clear changes in gender roles became evident in the villages with the out-migration of women as domestic workers. Husbands had to cook and do child care with the help of female relatives or neighbors and/or by themselves.

Gamburd (2002) points out that, often, young unmarried women work in free trade zones while married women with kids migrate to the Middle East to work as housemaids. New houses are built in villages and wives send money to their husbands to start new businesses. Some women come back and start new businesses. Women working in the Middle East also bring new trends to the village. Further investigation is required to understand how changes in gender roles affected spaces in their villages.

## **The Civil War**

Sri Lanka's civil war lasted over 25 years (1983-2009). Perera (2015) writes how the war affected social spaces and spatial structures in war-affected regions. Mainstream media discussed the influence of the war on national security and the economy. However, the influence on rural spaces that are outside of the war zone, from where the government soldiers came, is rarely discussed.

According to Susan Fainstein, in the United States during World War II, women were able to handle the burden of housework and paid labor since the government supported them with childcare, evening meals to take home and other public facilities. After the war however, the women were reassigned to the role of house managers. (2005, p. 4).

Perera (2015) examines how people produced spaces in the war zone and Colombo by responding to the impacts of the three decades long war. Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi De Alwis (2003) argue that "Men and women are affected differently by war". They (Ibid) cite Rajasingham-Senanayake (1999) to state that in Sri Lanka, the impact of war has been both disabling and enabling for women and men. The conflict has, for example, destabilized the sexual division of labour, resulting in the redefinition of women's roles in society.

The government in Sri Lanka did not pay such attention to the women who were struggling with their children in rural areas, but women themselves changed their own roles. For

example, women started to ride motor bicycles and three-wheelers and their participation in community events and public spaces changed. How the women's role changed and affected the spatial arrangement in villages is a topic that needs more in-depth study (See chapter 4).

## **Feminizing Space**

Planners produce spaces and infrastructure. Nihal Perera (2015) writes that ordinary people also engage in a continuous process of creating and defining spaces that they use every day. Existing literature suggests that people construct spaces to fulfill their needs. Women as a group have different aspirations and needs, which will lead them to produce different spaces. Knowledge on gendered spaces in rural Sri Lanka and gender as a social process that influences production of space is highly limited.

## **Conclusion: Gaps in the Existing Literature**

Most of the above literature discusses gendered spaces and how women have less accessibility to mainstream social and economic activity, as well as the ways they are discriminated against in public spaces and infrastructure. However, there are a few studies that try to understand how women deal with these gendered spaces, discrimination, disadvantage, and how they create room for their own activities and, along with it, their own spaces. Building on these studies, this thesis focuses on gender relationships, how women engage and question existing spatial structure and how they create spaces for their own life journeys within the village, both complementing and contesting existing social and spatial structures.

Existing literature provides a substantial background understanding about the womanhood and gender relationships in pre-colonial Lanka and how the contemporary definitions of woman, gender and gender relationships are colonial constructions which were further reinforced, developed and shaped by the nationalist thought. Yet, there are no

substantial studies about how gendered the spaces in villages are and how women produce spaces for their own life journeys. Perera (2002) opens the discussion on how women produce spaces in Colombo and continues the discussion through his book *People's Spaces* (Perera 2015). Nevertheless, there are no substantial studies on rural women and how they influence the social spaces in villages. This project opts to address this deficit.

This study focuses on one rural neighborhood in Sri Lanka; Nelibewa which is my (researcher's) native village. I use autoethnography to begin the story but use other ethnographic methods such as informal face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, mental maps and secondary information from Grama Niladhari, development officers, Samurdhi (welfare) officers and village organization. In order to establish some statistics, I used door-to-door counting. I also employed theories of gender in planning and production of spaces in order to contextualize the stories of people in the village and develop an understanding of gender, gender roles, gender relationships, womanhood, and the transformation of gender definitions that influences the transformation and modernization of spaces.

Based on archival research and field studies, the following chapters will advance the discussion of the process used by women to produce space, focusing on Nelibewa.



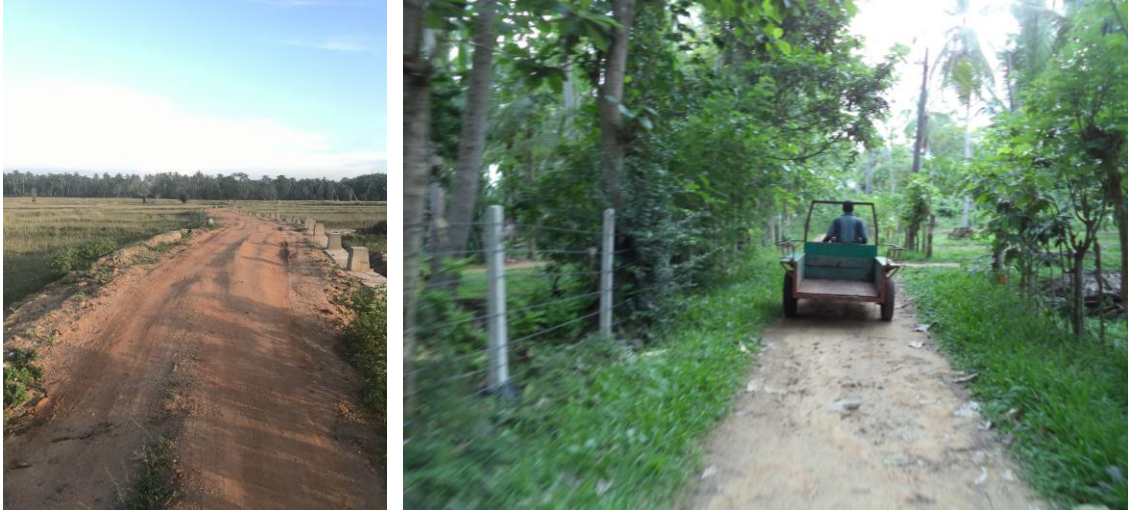
## CHAPTER 3

### NELIBEWA AND ITS GENDER RELATIONS

After both my paternal grandparents passed away in 1993, my father's nine siblings planned to subdivide my grandparents' land among them. As eight of them lived outside the native neighborhood, they wanted to fence off their portions of land. Before this, lands in the neighborhood did not have fences. The villagers did not like the idea of fencing because there were no roads in the village and most people accessed their houses across other people's land. My father and his siblings agreed to leave some space for a road along the edge of their land, but not the entire road width. This made everybody else want to fence their land. Laying roads within the village created many conflicts among villagers, particularly between neighbors, but finally they negotiated the space and laid a road network inside the neighborhood. This story shows the basic production of space in the village, its transformation and how much of it was produced by the women in the village.

There is a second part to the story: During and after the road-laying negotiation, neighbors had disputes with each other, particularly the ones who shared lot boundaries. My mother and our neighbor, Gamahamine, who was very good friends stopped talking to each other. The public well was the common gathering place for men and women in the village. Women had a regular time to use the public well, from around 3 pm to 6pm every day. Women built and developed their relationships with each other, shared information on various topics and developed their knowledge through their discussions by the public well, commonly called *welē linda* (well in the rice field). Gamahamine used to give me a bath. After the road issue, my mother and her stopped talking. During my ethnographic research Gamahamine recalled, "you began to cry, asking me to give you a bath, then I talked to your mother and gave you a bath". She added that "your mother and I became friends again. "That is how the village women begin and end disputes, by the well". The village is a community where children are brought up by its

members and everyone's business is of interest to others. Gamahamine refers to how the village operates through, in addition to other factors, interpersonal connections, friendships, friction, animosities, and social capital.



*Figure 3: Village roads*

Recently Gamahamine took me to the well and showed me that it is abandoned and dilapidated because all the villagers now have private bathing facilities at home, so they do not come to the well. Recently, during a long drought, almost all the wells dried up in the village. Therefore, the villagers requested funds from the government to repair the public well and begin a community water supply project to distribute pipe-borne water to the households in the village. After abandoning *wela linda* for some years, villagers are planning to transform it from a public bathing place to a community water project where people gathered not only to take a bath but also to socialize and negotiate the day-to-day life of the village. It will create fewer, but different, interactions among villagers.



Figure 4: *Wele linda*

The second part of the story also tells a lot about the socio-economic organization of the village. The decision-making process regarding socio-spatial structure, and resolving the conflicts caused by the decisions made, are integral to the daily life of the villagers. Further it shows that women have their own gathering spaces and ways of conflict resolution and negotiation. These spaces are also in transformation. For example, the *wele linda* was given different meanings over time by people, particularly by women in the village during the last two decades.

### **Understanding *Gama* from Within**

Definitions of gender, woman, gender roles and gender relationships are neither universal nor perpetual. This chapter explores the spatial organization of Nelibewa and how it operates. It will provide a background understanding of gender-related definitions and how the transformation of gender relationships and roles influence the transformation of the spatial organization of Nelibewa.

*Gama* (village) in Sri Lanka is perceived as an exotic, romantic and traditional spatial unit by the mainstream society, largely the urban middle class. Similar to Palansuriya's (1948) poem above, the popular media and literature romanticize the *gama* as environmentally, socially and

culturally exclusive. This outside-in view is not much different than how Westerners view the East, the Orient as explained in *Orientalism* (Said, 1978), or how the patriarchy sees women. This outside-in view is not only abstract, but also incomplete, discriminatory and othering in many ways. Similar to Orientalism, even the villagers view the village through this hegemonic, outside-in perspective of the *gama*.

I grew up in Nelibewa, thinking that it was not a “real” Sinhala-Buddhist village, like those illustrated on television, in movies, or in literature, such as newspapers and books read in school. Now I realize that I was looking for the abstract concept of “*gama*”, which is exotic and static. However, when I moved to Moratuwa, a suburb of the capital of Sri Lanka, Colombo, to attend college, I was identified as someone from a *gama*. My classmates from urban areas not only told me that I was *gode* (derogatory term that refers to rural people like hillbillies), but some also teased me by saying that I am from a jungle. Although the village is perceived as a romantic place which is beautiful, peaceful and green with a healthy lifestyle, it is backward (compared to the “modern” cities) and poor. It is the Other of the city; the city dwellers (at least my colleagues) idealized the village, but did not appreciate those who came from there such as me.

However, when I go back to the village, even now for ethnographic purposes, I do not live the abstract concepts of village, villagers, paddy fields, Buddhist temple and village shops, but as a villager; I engage with individuals like Siripala *mama*, Soma *nanda*, Loku *aiya*, *Waththe nanda*, Pol Nilame *mama*, and Kade *aththa*. The way I refer to them as relatives (*mama* (uncle), *nanda* (aunt), *aiya* (older brother), and *aththa* (grandfather)), speaks about the relationships I have with them and their personal identities. For example, “Pol Nilame” is the person who plucks coconuts in the village for his living. *Pol* is the local word for coconut. Before the ethnographic study which required me to know the names, I did not know the names of many villagers because, like other villagers, I used to call them by nicknames based on the

relationships that I have with them. While they are all descriptive of something, some nicknames are common, while others depend on personal experiences.



Figure 5: Kohok Kade and Mudalai

Even in regard to places, I mostly engage with Mawi-Ela Pola (the weekly market in Mawi-Ela) , Kohok Kade *handiya* and Nelibewa Temple. The names of the places have well-known stories which provide a sense of belonging to the villagers. Kohok Kade Handiya is a road intersection named after a store, yet it is a nickname derived by people. Kohok is a local term for hypocrisy and Kade is a store. The name “hypocrite’s store” was first used by villagers behind the back of the store owner; later, when people became familiar, it became the name. When I was small, once I called the owner of the store *kohok kade aththa* (Lit: Grandfather in the hypocrite’s store). Then my mother advised me not to say that, but now many people, even the shop-owners use the name. As this highlights, places in the village are not merely physical, but stories, belief systems and relationships.

There are various functions in the village that operate within the belief system of the villagers. These events have local meanings and perceptions. People engage, use and connect their daily activities with these places according to the meanings that they have given to these spaces and the functions. Although the old Mawi-Ela Pola was used for selling vegetables and other dry foods weekly, it was used by children to play on the other days of the week. The old Mawi-Ela Pola land was owned privately, so the owners used the land to dry paddy, coir and other food items, and park their vehicles on other days. Spaces are given meanings by the people who use those spaces. The definitions of the spaces are not static, but change continuously as the socio-economic context changes. When the socio-economic context changes and the natural need for the modernization arises, aspirations and belief systems of people transform. People as beings with agency negotiate these spaces according to their changing aspirations and belief systems. In short, *gama* is a lived space, created and continuously redefined by the villagers. It is difficult to understand the village through the abstract, outside-in concepts employed in current national and regional policies, programs and the media.

Now, the Pradeshiya Sabhas (rural district-governments) have constructed a new pola in a different location close to Mawi-Ela Handiya. The new *pola* is not used by villagers in the same ways as they used the self-built Mawi-Ela Pola. Most of the vendors have left the *pola* and some have found new *polas* in nearby villages to carry out their business. The new *pola* is on a government-owned land and people are not allowed to enter the land on non-*pola* days. Public do not use the old *pola* area except the owners of the land.

However, this influence by the government is a rare occasion in the village transformation process. The old Mawi- Ela Pola was produced and transformed by people through their daily negotiations in regard to changing aspirations and desires influenced by the external modernization trends.

## Production of Spaces of People's Aspirations

People transform spaces according to their changing aspirations. People in Nelibewa have always been changing its spaces, giving up some and producing new ones, transforming the spatial organization of the village as their desires change and new generations come to the forefront. Sriyantha, who is a 42-year old school teacher in Nelibewa, said that Mawi-Ela Pola was first located on government land close to Mawi-Ela Handiya and it was where the villagers like his father used to sell the surplus vegetables from their farms. Villagers sold their goods for money or bartered for other goods, particularly exchanging their vegetables.

Sriyantha and his father Kirimudiyanse explained that by the end of the 1960s, there were organized vendors who bought vegetables from farmers at farms or another *pola* (local markets) and sold at Mawi-Ela Pola. These organized vendors began travelling from *pola* to *pola* in different villages. More exotic vegetables came to the village from faraway places, particularly from the hill country, the vegetables of which the villagers call Nuwara-Eli *elawalu*. The farmers thus began to limit cultivation to one crop –i.e., a cash crop-- and to develop medium-to-large scale farms during the 1970s. They thus developed a larger economy of scale. This also created a corresponding market culture in the village. Today, the villagers must have money in their hands on the *pola* day so they can buy their household needs for a week.

*Pola* also created a platform for women to find employment. Sriyantha further added that although the Handiya is a common gathering place for men today, when he was a child, men in the village used to gather in certain houses in the village. He said men in two neighborhoods called Ambawaththa and Pahala Nelibewa used to gather at *kureekotuwe gedara* (a house bearing this name) in the evenings. "There were 11 boys in the family at *kureekotuwe gedara* and there was also a radio; so men gathered in the house to listen to the radio and to talk to each other," Sriyantha added. *Kureekotuwe gedara* had one of the largest families in the village;

it had 11 boys and 3 girls. The house was large and had a *pila* (a ledge built with sand and mud) around the house. Manikhami, a 67-year-old unmarried daughter from the family proudly said;

Our *pila* was large enough to accommodate all the men in the village. As girls, we were asked to make *ranawara* (a herbal tea) and other local drinks to treat the villagers. When we had enough harvest, we prepared *maniocca* (cassava) or sweet potatoes with *katta sambal* (a chilli paste), so men could take a bite as they talked. Some used to bring some yams and other raw food with them; so our mother and sisters used to make food for everyone, occasionally.

Most of the important decisions related to the village were made at this gathering. Issues discussed included when to begin farming for the next season, how to distribute (irrigation) water, whose rice fields should be prepared first for the cultivation and also matters related to house building and thatching (renewing roofing material) of houses. Women were not included in these conversations. Gamarala said “after getting dark, women were not advised to go out. They put kids to bed and slept early while men joined other men in their gathering places.”

Pahala Kade (Common name for Kohok Kade) *mudalali* (vendor) found that a radio is a good way to attract people. He bought a radio in 1972. He shared his ideas about the time he bought a radio.

It was the Mathini's [Lady-Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike's] time. There was a big drought. People worked to restore the *wewas* [reservoirs] in the village. All citizens were given food rations and people bought only a few necessities from village shops.

With time, *dan lella* [draft board] and carrom boards were added to the stores at *handiya*. Men began gathering in Mawi-Ela Handiya and Kohok Kade Handiya to chat and play cards and carrom. These public gathering places at *handiyas* were developed by the villagers, mostly by men.

Not only historically but even today, the *gama* is not highly influenced by state, planners and other organized professionals. Spaces of the village are mostly produced by the people in the village; Hence it is a good case study to explore the inside-out processes of space



production. People both produce spaces and redefine places in the village. This has caused the continuous transformation of the village. Hence, the village is a spatial process; It is more than a physical entity that can be understood through static maps, physical form or administrative boundaries.

## **The Boundaries of Nelibewa**

Although the *Grama Niladhari* (Village Officer) area officially marks administrative boundaries of the village, the villagers also have their own boundaries of the *gama*. Most of the villagers perceive the village in association with temple- and village-organizations. The Buddhist temple in the village plays a central role in the social and spatial organization of Nelibewa. When I asked my informants to draw a map of the village (see appendix), most of them marked temple first or as the center of their drawing; some started the drawing from their home and others used Mavi-Ela Handiya as the starting point of their drawings. All 30 informants marked the temple on their map and also gave more significance to the symbol they used to indicate the temple. Some informants tried to match their perception with the official Grama Niladhari boundary and they brought the idea that the official Grama Niladhari boundary is different from the *dayaka* (donor) area of the temple, indicating how villagers go by the *dayaka* area of the temple as the village. More than sixty percent of the informants demarcated the village without considering the Grama Niladhari boundary. Nelibewa in National and Regional Plans/Structures

As mentioned above, *gama* is not directly subjected to national and regional development discourse. The national government has launched rural development programs<sup>5</sup> from time to time. Every election manifesto presented by every political party as part of its campaigns during

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<sup>5</sup> These include Gam Udawa (Village Reawakening) (1980), Gama Neguma (boosting the Village (economy)) (2006), Maga Neguma ((rural) road development program) (2015) and Eka Gamakata Eka Wedak (one project per village) (2012).

general and presidential elections in Sri Lanka includes a rural development component. These programs mostly cover infrastructure development in rural areas, particularly transportation (roads) and agriculture and irrigation (dams and canals) infrastructure. Although these programs have not caused large influences across villages, every village has been affected.



*Figure 6: Sign boards for advertising development projects*

In Nelibewa, how these development funds are used in transforming the space and how the village is really transformed depends a lot on community organizations; these play a large role in village development at Nelibewa. These organizations have the power to prioritize the needs of the village and direct funds to these needs. Community Development Organizations decide which stretches of what roads need repair and paving, and which road intersections need streetlights. Samurdi Samithiya, the organization of government welfare receivers, in the village organize *shramadhana*, i.e., labor pooling events to repair roads, clean up and refurbish public amenities. When health clinics and other awareness programs by the government and Non Governmental Organizations come to the village, different community organizations get involved directly. Welfare, development and modernization of the village are monitored and

influenced by community development organizations. In addition to the three main village-level community organizations, there are other neighborhood level organizations that contribute to the development of the village in different ways.

### **Blurry Definitions of Public and Private**

Spaces in the village are neither clearly separated nor defined for given functions or purposes. As described earlier, spaces of the village are lived spaces where the activities of people give definitions. These definitions get redefined within short periods of time due to changes of use and purpose. The same space could be used for something different at different times of the day, days of the week and seasons of the year. The activities also change with time; hence the definitions of spaces change too.

The outside-in categorizations of spaces as public and private is insufficient to understand spaces in Nelibewa. Even adding sub-categories such as semi-public and semi-private spaces does not make this categorization complete and useful. Understanding spaces in the village requires the consideration of the temporal dimension of the use of space. Some events transform houses into public spaces and serve as spaces of socialization for villagers.

These spaces that people create out of their needs and for special events are also gendered. During funerals, weddings and alms giving in families, private houses become public spaces. Anyone in the village is welcome and food is served by the family or villagers; even an enemy is not asked to leave, but served. Even bedrooms become open to guests. People congregate in the house for a week or two, playing Carrom, cards and talking to each other.



*Figure 7: Women gathered in back of the house to help during an event*



*Figure 8: : Men gathered in front of the house to help during an event*

Weerathilake and Gunadasa said that when they were young (referring to 20-30 years ago), people gathered in funeral houses and used to talk about *samsara*, *karma* and other topics from Buddhist philosophy. Weerathilaka said the villagers read poems from Wessanthara Jathakaya (a story of Buddha's earlier life as someone who donated his wife and kids to

hemits). Today, it is not common for people get together and talk *dharma* (Buddha's teachings), yet funerals and overnight chanting of *pirith* (Buddhist discourses) by Buddhist monks are where people mostly get together. Ranjani said "people are busy and they do not have time for social life, so funerals and other events at houses give them a reason to get together to socialize while having free food and drinks especially during night time".

During most of these events at homes, village-women get together to prepare food and help members of the family members of the diseased person. The roles are gendered in these events and they create gendered division of the spaces within domestic premises. Events at private homes and other communal events have become a typical way the villagers socialize while helping a family that is in need. Women in the village get together to cook, clean and do other works mostly related to the kitchen. Men also help with some labor work that is required, mostly out doors and in the main parts of the house. Even the socialization at these events is highly gendered.

### **Community Events in the Village**

The public sphere in the village is not solely proclaimed as public space, particularly in a Western sense, but mostly centered around celebrations and other functions such as funerals and weddings. During these events, people create and change the physical space according to their needs and activities. During the new year season in mid-April, villagers have different events like *awurudu uthsawa* (new year celebrations) and play traditional / cultural sports. Villagers visit each other in the village and their relatives in other places. New Year season is after the rice harvest, so villagers convert rice fields and *kamatha* (threshing ground for paddy) into playgrounds.



Mahesh, a 34-year-old man in the village, complained how all neighbors used to get together during the *nonagathaya*<sup>6</sup> and played cricket or other games even 5-10 years ago. People spent the *nonagathaya* on religious and leisure activities. Mahesh said that now people watch television and stay at home during *nonagathaya*.



Figure 9: Gammaduwa Festival similar to Pandam Dolaha Festival

Source: <http://serendib.btoptions.lk/index.php>

Traditional games for women are mostly of the indoor types, while men play games exercising their physical strength. *Pandam dolaha* (festival organized to thank the gods who are looking after the village with offerings), *aluth sahal mangallaya* (rice harvest festival), *kiri ithireema* (the boiling of milk to celebrate the dawn of new year), and *kohombakankariya* (festival to pray to a particular god asking for protection from evil and sickness using different performances dedicated for that god) are some of the events organized in the village to merit gods. When there are droughts, epidemics and other difficult periods in the village, the villagers ask for the god's help and promise that when they get through this difficult situation

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<sup>6</sup> *Nonagathaya* is the time that is not auspicious for any significant activity. It occurs before the auspicious time that defines the beginning of the new year.

successfully, they will make particular offerings such as milk rice, fruits, coconut plants and dancing and musical performances. Women are relatively more engaged in the offering related to the Hindu goddess “Pathtini”. *Kiriammawaru danaya* is a popular event. Seven women who have given birth to children are invited to households and the house owners provide food and gifts for them.



Figure 10: *Kiri Ammawaru danaya* (alms giving)

As Gamarala explained, *aluth sahal mangallaya* (Lit. new rice festival) is the event after the rice harvest. The villagers offer the best and the first portion of rice to the Buddha and the next portion to the god who protects the village. The residents of Nelibewa do the offerings ceremonially and thank the god for helping them get a good harvest that year. *Pandamdolaha* (Lit. 12 torches) is a large event that happens in the village once in every several years. The villagers together promise the god that they will do a *pandam dolaha shanthikarmaya* if the god helps them to get through long-term droughts and large epidemics. There were only three of

these events in the village during my lifetime. *Pandamdolaha* is an overnight event and most of the responsibilities are taken by the older men in the village. In matters and events that concern gods, women are considered inferior, said Kiri Mudiyanse who is involved in most religious and community activities in the village.

The land where the Pandamdolaha in Nelibewa used to be held is called Dewala Idama (Lit. Shrine Land). Although the land is a privately-owned coconut plantation, owner of the land willingly allows the villagers to conduct the ceremony in his land. Even today, villagers including the owner believe that this land is suitable for residential use due to its holly location. Landuse and space production are highly connected to local spiritual believes in the village.



Figure 11: A shrine for the god built at a devotee's house in Nelibewa

### ***Kaiya*: Communal Labor pooling**

Nelibewa is a village built by its residents. They negotiated spaces forming a community and continue to do so by helping each other in everyday life. These community activities are called *kaiya* in the village. This is a labor-pooling mechanism. There are different types of *kaiyas* in the village such as *hee kaiya* (preparing the land before cultivation), *goyam kaiya* (rice



planting), *mada kaiya* (renovating water retention ponds), *pol athu kaiya* (thatching the roofs) and *batha kaiya* (harvesting). These events are aimed at helping an individual family in need, for example, to re-thatch their roof. During the process, the neighbors gather to help the family, and the family provides food and drinks to those who help. Women in the neighborhood gather to cook for such events. Gamarala is proud to say, “Nelibewa is one of the last few villages in the area where the *kaiya* system in cultivation is still functioning to some extent.”



Figure 12: Bandara Menike in 2015



Figure 13: Bandara Menike and her Sister, Soma in 1962

These communal events were the main ways the villagers socialized and most of these events had gendered roles. Even the construction and repairing of houses was a community event: Women prepared the thatching material while men thatched the roof. Women used to prepare thatching materials throughout the year, when they had extra time. This gave women a reason to get together and talk around the year. Bandara Menike, a 63-year-old woman from Nelibewa who lives in a neighboring village said, “women did not have an assigned time for

leisure. We found time to hang out with other girls while doing the work assigned to us by our mothers". She further added that women in the village fetched water, collected firewood, and prepared thatching material in groups while sharing information, knowledge and stories.

## **Spaces are Gendered**

The socialization in the village is based on communal, religious, other special and daily activities. Public spaces are where these actions occur, except when houses are transformed into public spaces such as when a funeral occurs. As explained above, most of these are organized around gendered roles. These roles and processes create gendered spaces in the village. Even within the houses, during public events, this division is visible; the most obvious example is when the women get together at the back of the house while men gather in the front.

As discussed above, the *handiya* is mostly a men's gathering place. Men also gather at bus stops, three-wheel stands and create spaces of loitering along streets, perhaps with a high degree of agency to select a location. These public spaces where men gather are clearly visible, hence before the study I had the idea that public spaces are highly occupied by men and that women lead less social lives and have fewer spaces to socialize. I was only able to see the issues women face in occupying public spaces. The study of Nelibewa shows that women use their agency in creating spaces to socialize in the midst and the margins of the male-dominant system of spaces and the hegemony created around these, limiting women's freedom of using the spaces. This is largely supported by my switching of the research-focus from viewing women as "victims" to women as "survivors," following the same switch made by Perera (2015). Yet, there are many restrictions that are visible for women's use of public spaces in the village. Time of spaces is one of the key restrictions.



Figure 14: Mawi- Ela Handiya; a gathering place for men

## Gendered Time of Spaces

Differences in the use of public spaces by women depend on many factors such as age, class and education of the woman and the time of the day. According to Sriyantha, the control of women's use of space after dark is not new; it had been the case in the village for an unknown time. For him, women did not go out after dark in the village because they believed that there were supernatural powers that would harm them.

When I was small, my neighbor, Gama Hamine, used to send me home before dark if I visit her house in the evening. During our interview, she recalled the practice: "Girls should not go out after dark as Kalu Kumaraya (a particular devil) would cast a spell and harm them". While not advised, if a woman has to go out after dark, she has to take something made out of iron with her for protection from Kalu Kumaraya, or other evil eyes, and chew a betel leaf as she

walks. When I was a bit late to go home, Gama Hamine used to give me a betel leaf to chew and asked me to run home which was less than 100 meters away.

This and other fears control women's use of spaces. Use of the public well by women after dark, roughly 6 pm, is also controlled. Men use the public well to take baths, even in the dark; they also go to a bathing place at the *wewa* (the reservoir). Folk stories and local knowledge reproduce and support the continuation of the patriarchy, regardless of its beginning, making women adopt an inferior position voluntarily.

### **Familiarization to Culture in Husband's Village**

Women are considered a cultural archive within the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist view in Sri Lanka (Perera 1997). Women represent the culture and also take the culture forward to the next generation. Although women grow up and inherit the lifestyle of their village, and are expected to be the caretakers of culture, they go to live in their husbands' villages after marriage. Despite a national culture that considers women as representatives and protectors who would transfer national Sinhalese-Buddhist culture to the next generation, locally women are expected to represent local values of the culture and often get accused of being unable to learn different cultural practices particular to a village. Despite moving and other constraints, married women soon adapt to the culture of their husband's village.

According to Newton Gunasinghe (1996), weddings in villages had been of two different types. Weddings between a boy and girl from the same village were very simple, while weddings between a couple from two different villages were celebrated because two different families in different villages with different value systems got together. These kinds of marriages not only helped refresh cultural practices but also symbolized the exchange of cultural practices. *Deega vivaha* is when women moved to the husband's village. This is the most common

marriage in Sri Lanka and it causes the “agents of the culture”, i.e., women, to change their socio-spatial setting from the village they grew up in to their husband’s village.

Mahesh, a man from Nelibewa, said that the culture of the *gama* [Nelibewa] is vanishing because today’s women are practicing and teaching kids the culture from their own village. According to Michael Carrithers, culture is not a static phenomenon but changes with interactions; while people form their actions in relation to the larger notion of their collective culture, cultures form and develop through the interaction between individuals (Carrithers, 1999). Women play a huge role in this cultural mix and transformation in villages.

The women I met, talked to and know from the village shared their stories about how they learned the socio-cultural practices of their husband’s village. All the women were not similarly good at learning or adapting to the new culture of the husband’s village. Women do not simply adapt to the life of the husband’s village, but also bring new practices from their own villages and test them in new places. Public life in the villages develops and evolves with the inputs from the women who continuously join the village.

Although Gunadasa, Sriyantha and Mahesh are in different age groups, they had very similar ideas about women’s responsibility in teaching culture to the next generation. Mahesh had a strong complaint about women not learning the culture of the husband’s village; he also used the exact Sinhala word for culture when he made the comment. Sriyantha welcomed the women who bring a part of their culture to the village and supported women having more space to exercise their agency, accelerating cultural hybridization in the village. Although men had a general understanding about how women influence the culture of the village, stories of individual women showed that every woman has a different way of familiarizing herself to the culture of the village.

Swarna, a 42-year old married woman with one son, said that she was from a very traditional patriarchal family and her father was a very dominant figure. Her parents told her that after marriage, “your home is your husband’s home” and the “girls’ parents’ home is not the girls’ home anymore.” She had to live with her mother-in-law at her house after marriage. At the beginning of her married life, Swarna liked to spend few days once in every few months at her parent’s home. When she spent a few days at her parent’s house, with her husband’s permission, her mother asked, “when are you going back to your home?” Swarna was shocked. First, in Sri Lanka, it is impolite to ask when is leaving, even from a guest. To get the question from her own mother about leaving her childhood home, where she was more comfortable, was awkward and hurtful.

She asked her mother, “am I bothering you?” Swarna’s mother explained to her that when she is spending more time at her parent’s house, there is a possibility that the villagers would suspect that she is not doing well with her marriage and/or with her husband’s family; perhaps she is not well accepted in her husband’s village. So, Swarna’s mother recommended that not to stay for too long at their house. Swarna said, “this made me realize that I have no other option, no other home, I have to adapt to the life in my husband’s village”.

Today, Swarna is a woman very much needed at every event in her husband’s village. She participates in all village associations. She is welcome at public events and is invited to participate in cooking events that happen in the village. Swarna is also adding to the village culture by adopting some practices from her native village, thus changing her new village.

Sepalika’s story is different from Swarna’s. Sepalika was a very active woman who participated in most public events and associations in her native village before marriage. She said that she faced difficulties adapting to life in her husband’s village. Although her native village and her husband’s village were close by, located a few miles away from each other, she did not feel included into the community life of her husband’s village. She said, “even peeling a

potato is different in the two villages. When I joined some community cooking events, other women did not like the ways I did certain things”.

She tried to adapt to the culture in her husband’s village for a few years, but did not achieve much success. Then she convinced her husband (and their family) to move to her native village by pointing out the lack of utilities and amenities in his village. Sepalika maintains a very powerful position in her family and also her village today. She is the secretary of the Village Development Committee and an active member of many other village organizations. Although her husband is the only income-earner of the family, she is the one who manages their family budget and makes most of the decisions. Although this marriage was originally not a *binna vivaha* (Matrilocal marriage), most of the stereotypes about *binna vivaha* apply to their family life and also to Sepalika’s role in the village.

*Binna vivaha* was discussed by most of the informants during the informal interviews, especially when I brought up the woman’s role in making decisions in the family and village. Gunadasa remembered a popular saying in the village “*Binna bahapu miniha hulu aththai thal aththai hamawelema wahale gahagena inna one*”; this means that in matrilocal marriages, men have to be ready to leave the woman’s village at any time. This implies that women have a more powerful role when they live in their own villages. Mahesh talked about the Bas family in the village. He said that Bas Nanda, the woman, had more power in making decisions in her family. Her husband who migrated to this village after marriage has to agree with her decisions most of the time. As he is unhappy about this, they always have arguments.

Matrilocal marriages were common in the hill country, according to the Kandyan Common Law that was practiced before the introduction of Roman-Dutch Law by the colonial authorities (see chapter 2). This change influenced the gender roles in the village. Bandara Menike said that although other women in the village did not use money much, Bas Nanda used to sell rice to other families in the village to earn some money. Bandara Menike believes that

Bas Nanda could do this because she lived in her native village and she had a closer relationship with families in the village.

The level of involvement in the village and its activities by women has a strong connection to their ability to familiarize the village. Women who live in their native village after marriage have more powerful roles in engaging in the social life of the village while women who changed their location, i.e., to live in husband's village, have familiarized the life in the new village and developed their (new) social networks using a variety of ways and means.

Perera (2015) demonstrates that subjects familiarize spaces by both changing themselves to fit the assigned subject positions and spaces and by changing the assigned roles and given spaces to suit their needs and familiarity. Swarna accepted that she had to become a part of her husband's village; so, she adopted the practices of her husband's village by changing her habits and practices. At the same time, she also influences the social life and spaces of Nelibewa, her husband's village, with the knowledge she brought from her native village. Some snacks and dishes that Swarna makes are new to the village and other women learned the recipes and preparations from her. Swarna's usual outfit is a long skirt and blouse, although other women in the village, especially young women, wear short skirts.

Gunadasa said women in Nelibewa should learn how a Sinhalese Buddhist woman should dress from Swarna. In this sense, all foreign ideas are not rejected by the locals; they adopt what they see as appropriate. Intentionally or unintentionally, women who join the village through marriage bring new practices and trends to the village as much as they learn and adapt themselves to the culture of the new village.

Ranjani, who migrated to Nelibewa after her marriage found her own ways of interacting with her husband's village. She came as a housewife, but got a job one and a half years after her marriage and arrival. She shared how she changed the way she interacted with the village.



Ranjani said that she likes to have less interaction with the villagers, but she knew that it is important to have some level of connection. Therefore, although she does not want to interact, she found her own way of maintaining a social network. When there is a ceremony that involves community cooking or women's participation at a village house, she meets women in the household and helps them with money.

Although Ranjani does not participate in public events, she gets enough help from women in the neighborhood who gather when there is an event at her house. Mahesh, Soma and Gama Hamine's perspective was that Ranjani does not interact with village women closely because she is more educated than other women. Ranjani complained that she is not interested in the things that women talk about and share, nor in spending her time on these events. She believed that her financial support was more important for village women than her participation. While her answer does not invalidate the perspective of other villagers, the social gap that she maintains with the other villagers could be due to her education and the ability to contribute money, but it could also be a very personal way that she chooses for social interaction.

When it comes to religion, women are considered inferior to men in the village. Although cooking in the village is usually done by women, during the events related to gods, women are not allowed to take part of any activity related to cooking. Responding to my question about this matter, Soma said, women are not considered pure enough to cook offerings for gods. "Maybe it is because the gods are male," she added, but also took some time to think about it. Women after menopause are sometimes allowed to make offerings. There are female gods; for example, Paththini is a very popular goddess among people in the area. She said that women are not even allowed to cook for this goddess.

Soma began questioning the tradition and her daughter-in-law who is a school teacher in the village also contributed: "now some women who live without a man in the household do some rituals for god like *kiriithireema* (boiling milk) by themselves so, things are changing".

However, women's contribution to events related to gods is still significantly less. Manikhami, an unmarried woman, and Swarna, a widow living with her only daughter, said that at the beginning of the new year or in special situations, they both do *kiriithireema* as an offering to god. Both of them said that "if god is god, he will understand that this woman does not have male family members but still respects the god and makes offerings. So, the god will bless us". This conversation demonstrates how women practice religion, especially how they question and redefine the hegemonic knowledge of gender roles and definitions. Men and priests may think one thing, but the women have adapted religious practices to suit their abilities and needs.

This story also reveals how the hegemonic patriarchal system of the village views women as not "pure" and inferior to men when it comes to matters of religion and god. Buddhist temples in the village are headed by Buddhist monks. While most leaders of the village are men, the chief monk is the main adviser of the village. Although women maintain a strong relationship with the temple as *dyakas* (donors of money and the needful), men have stronger connections with the monk and the temples.

Religion is a powerful tool that defines gender roles in the village. When the education system was based in temples, only men got access to education. The patriarchal system of the village was supported by the power men had in religion. Hegemonic understanding that men are superior and should be given more respect by women was carried forward from generation to generation.

Women play a huge role in taking the patriarchal system forward by training their daughters and other family members to follow and take it forward. Women are the ones who expect their sons to marry a woman with a good dowry. Kumari said, although her then boyfriend eloped with her when she was underage for marriage, her mother-in-law always reminded her that she did not bring any property with her when she joined their family.

Some women said that they could not enjoy their first years of married life if they had to live with their husband's family. Swarna said that her mother-in-law uses the term "*pita genu*", i.e., outside women (from other villages), to refer to her daughters-in-law. Swarna noted that "she [her mother-in-law] is also not originally from this village. She had to come to this village and underwent all these problems of getting used to the life in this village. She still treats us bad". Swarna also observed that her mother-in-law is representing the values of her husband's village and finds issues when her two daughters-in-law fail to perform their activities in a way that is acceptable to the village, which is a new place to them. Women not only adapt themselves to the husband's village culture, but as they grow old and become mothers-in-law, they take the role of cultural trainer for their daughters and daughters-in-laws.

Dowry is a patriarchal practice that women continue in the village. One of the political parties in the country once proposed that the dowry system should be abolished. Today, most families consider asking for a dowry directly from the girl's family to be shameful. Mahesh, Amila, Chamila and Rajitha are men in the village who got married recently. They are between 27 and 34 years of age. None of them talked in favor of the dowry. Chamila and Rajitha ran away with their wives and did not care for a dowry. Rajitha said "It is good if she could make a contribution to our family future, but we made a quick decision to get married and I do not regret it". Chamila said he does not even care if his wife brought a dowry or not because she is from a poor family, but a nice woman. Mahesh's wife has a government job and she is more educated than Mahesh. He said it is a shame for a man to ask for dowry and especially if the woman is more educated and has a good job. Amila said that he asked his wife not to bring a dowry because when women bring a dowry, they try to claim some power over the decisions made in the family. He said his wife still brought some household items and some gold jewelry as dowry.

Many girls in the village have the idea that they want to take a dowry with them when they marry. Hasanathi said she began working in a garment factory after her ordinary level exam,

because she wanted to earn her dowry. Hewamanne (2016) writes that women work in FTZ with the expectation of finding their dowry. Hasanthi, who started working in a garment factory after her ordinary level exam (grade 10), when she was 16 years old, said “girls started saving money from their first month at work for their dowry.” Women have organized micro-financial groups at factories to help women save money and buy household items; they call this collection device *seettu*. For an example, 10 girls get together and make an agreement to contribute Rs. 1,000 to a pool of money every month, usually on the payday. They draw numbers to determine who gets the pot of cash each month.

Although men are given more powerful positions in the socio-spatial organization than women in Nelibewa, mothers are the most respected members in families and in the village. Mothers are considered second only to the Buddha, and the biological and social roles of women in the village bring children closer to their mothers than to their fathers. Although some women were not born in the village but moved after their marriages, they have become a part of the village with time. How women familiarize the culture of the village is also a very crucial aspect that influences gender roles and how these roles transform in the village.

The above discussion on how women familiarize into the patriarchy, such as bringing a dowry, demonstrates that when a system becomes hegemonic, its beneficiaries do not have to put forth any effort to take the system forward, but the oppressed themselves take the system forward. The mothers-in-law, for example, develop power through becoming the guardians of the system and controlling daughters-in-law. Yet as they take the system forward, the oppressed also change it. For example, the women themselves earn their dowries, transforming themselves into more powerful partners in marriage.

## Transformation of Gender Roles

In every domestic, community and religious activity, men and women in the village have different roles. Bandara Menike said that the role of men was clearly defined and women had to take all the leftover duties. Yet other roles, such as cooking and childcare were strongly defined as women's roles. Bandara Menike said her mother used to work in farmlands with her father and also do the household chores. Harris writes that the colonizers viewed women in Sri Lanka as taking more responsibility with farming, child bearing and household chores (2001).

Gender conditions and relations in historic Lanka, before colonialism, seem different according to the ideas contributed by Gunadasa, Gamarala, Weerathilaka, Soma and Bandaramenike. There was no nuclear family concept and the large family gave more freedom for women to work in their rice fields, home gardens and the *chenas* (dry cultivations). Older children in the family, cousins and grandparents helped mothers to look after their children and do household chores. Mothers were close to kids in many ways but fathers and grandfathers were also sitting on the *pila*, the inbuilt sitting areas ("verandahs") in traditional Sri Lankan houses, sharing stories with children. Although there are different gender roles, the boundaries are not so tight. The definition of gender roles is also changing with time and the village is also changing with the involvement of redefined gender roles in its socio-spatial organization.

Dayaka Samithiya (Lit. Temple Donor Association), Maranadara Samithiya (Lit. Death Benevolent Society) and Sanasa Samithiya (Lit. Sanasa Association) are three very powerful organizations in the village, all with strong connections to the temple. The chief monk of the temple is also the chief advisor of all these organizations in Nelibewa. Villagers usually become members of the Temple Donor Association and the Death Benevolent Society at the same time. In order to receive benefits (death donations, community support at the funeral and a space at the cemetery) from these organizations as a villager, the individual and the family have to get

the membership of these two organizations. The Death Benevolent Society plays a huge role during funerals in the village.

## **Gender in Community Organizations**

During my fieldwork, I attended a community organization meeting, representing my parents' family. I found that these organizations took my name off the list soon after my marriage. When I questioned them about taking my name off without any prior notification, even when my name is still registered under my parents' family in the official records in the Grama Niladhari division and the national census and statistics, the president of the Nelibewa Death Benevolent Society said, "your name should be recorded in your husband's village organizations."

Then I said "I did not submit the membership forms for my husband's village organizations since I'm still a member here and I did not permanently move to my husband's village but commute between Colombo, my parents' house and my parents-in-law's house". The president said that when a girl from the village gets married, they usually take her name off unless the girl forwards a special request or they learn that it is a *binna* marriage, in which her husband will come to live in the village. When a boy gets married, they assume that the newly married couple will live in the village and they send a membership form to register the new (female) member of the family. If the couple lives in a separate house, i.e., forming a separate household, the society will notify the new family to open a new membership account. The president added that *binna* marriages and other occasions where women need to stay enrolled in the village organizations are very rare since women usually move to their husbands' villages.

Then I joked, "Now, if I die I will not get death donations and I will neither have space in the cemetery in my village nor in my husband's village. "*Duwa*, [daughter]," the president of the

Death Benevolent Society said, “It’s not good for you to have your name in the list of our village. That’s why we took your name off”. My close relative, my father’s older brother who is an active member in the Death Benevolent Society and the secretary of the *dayaka sabhawa* said that “you should ask your parents-in-law to include your name in their village organizations”. He also said to the president of Death Benevolent Society, “they were in Colombo after the marriage and she went to America after few months. That is why her name is on the village organizations, but I will inform her father-in-law to include her in their village”.

Later, my father’s brother explained to me that I should not have talked about not being a member in the organizations in my husband’s village because it could imply that I am not very well accepted in my husband’s family or his village. This idea about inclusion of women in a new space, culture and community is highly connected to the gender definitions of the village and the power that a woman has in negotiating space in the village. The basic assumption of the village organizations about a woman getting married is that she will leave the village after the marriage and become an outsider. The society had difficulty in understanding my situation in which I did not become a “permanent” part of any other village, but still used my parents’ address as my permanent address and kept my name in the records of Nelibewa Grama Niladhari division.

A village woman who overheard our conversation brought up another scenario. She said if I do not include my name in the village records, it will be difficult for me to get service from midwives (public health service). Although public health services are not officially connected to village organizations, these services are connected to them in many informal ways. There is a midwife appointed to each Grama Niladhari division or to a few few divisions. They do not have field offices or assigned spaces for clinics in many villages like Nelibewa. Village organizations or temples provide some space for these professionals to conduct information sessions and/or health clinics. Midwives visit houses of newly married women, pregnant women, women with

infants and other women at request. They provide some level of sexual education, contraceptives and vitamins for women. Midwives earn lot of respect among village women.

Maternal clinics provide spaces for women to socialize in the village and incorporate women into the village life. This is the new village in which the woman has become a married woman, a new identity she presumably did not have in the home village. A newly married girl in the village said “I used to walk to the clinic with some other pregnant women in the village and meet other women in the clinic.” With the compulsory inclusion of their name in the organizations and women’s health clinics in the husband’s village, women begin their process of familiarizing to the life in the husband’s village.

Sriyantha, the president of the *Dayaka Samithiya*, said that eighty percent of the participants of monthly meetings are women and most of these women actively get involved in decision making about village development and community events, although most active members are men and all the powerful positions are still held by men. He mentioned that 5-10 years ago, although women attended these meetings, they did not involve themselves in discussions, but simply physically represented their family.

Bandara Menike, a sixty-three year old woman who was born and grew up in Nelibewa, but now lives in her husband’s village, said only men in the village used to attend the Death Benevolent Society meetings when she was young. Men participated in all community events and took part in making decisions concerning public life and spaces in the village. Bandara Menike said that, in the early 1970s, women also decided to join community development in the village and formed a women’s association named “Rathnawali Kulagana Samithiya”. She said that this women’s association used to organize *shramadhana* (self-help events) where women could get together and do community work. They read poems they wrote at home, sang and performed when they met. They learned different skills from each other and helped each other to grow.



Bandara Menike recalls those days with nostalgia. She said, “those days too, like today, men looked down upon women’s gatherings and recognized women’s conversations as ‘small talk’. Yet we, especially young unmarried girls, found our reasons to get together”. According to her, these formal associations were one platform for women to get together, but there were many other ways in which they created social life, discussed later in the chapter.

Although it is very rare that newly married women are expected to go to the meetings of village organizations, women are expected to associate the temple closely as a part of their responsibility in learning common practices in the village soon because the women are considered the ones to teach village culture to village kids. After marrying a man in the village years ago, Mallika and her husband shared a house with her husband’s parents. Her mother-in-law used to go to the meetings of the village organizations. After 3 years, the couple moved to a separate house and got the membership as a separate family. She said

I attend the meetings of the village organization most of the time. My husband’s job is plucking coconuts for villagers, so he has to work during the Saturdays when meetings are held. He does not like to participate in monthly meetings even when he does not go to work, but he participates in these meetings at least once a year.

The head of the household (usually the man) is expected to attend the first meeting of every year because that is when the office holders and the executive committee of the organizations are elected and the most important decisions about village development for the new year are made. This is how the most powerful positions in the organizations go to men, although not the only reason. Although more women are now involved in village organizations, according to Sriyantha, most of the villagers consider that men have better strength and power to bear important positions and make crucial decisions. Perera (2001) also writes how women are not considered strong enough to hold higher level positions in associations, even in universities where most members are educated.

Karuna (47) holds a different view: “my husband does not understand the importance of these organizations, but he will understand it when one of us in the family dies”. Most of the people participate in these village organizations because they need support from the villagers in troubled situations, especially when there is a death in the family. Karuna complained that her husband is an alcoholic who spends every cent he earns from labor on illicit liquor. She married him 19 years ago. She works in a poultry farm to earn for her family.

Coincidentally, I was present at the Maranadara Samithiya (Death Benevolent Society) meeting when Karuna was first accompanied to the meeting by her sister-in-law Karunawathie, who was already a member in the organization. Even though I was a child then, I still remember the conversation and Karunawathie also recalled the memories and verified my memory. Karunawathie and her husband shared a house with the husband’s widowed sister, her son and husband’s mother, but the husband and wife soon moved out to a small shelter on the same land, due to some conflicts in the shared household. They lived in that house for 3-4 years as a separate family in Grama Niladhari records, but did not register at the village organization.

Once he opted for membership, Karuna’s husband was asked to pay membership fees for the years that they lived separately, according to the constitution of the Maranadara Samithiya. Then Karuna explained how ignorant her husband is and requested that they offer her the membership without charging dues. Ranbanda, the president of the Death Benevolent Society, then stated that the villagers should appreciate her idea to involve herself in the village organization, being a woman from another village far away from this. All villagers agreed.

Women show special interest in both Maranadara Samithiya and Dayaka Samithiya (Temple Donor Association) and they are afraid that they will not have enough support at a family death. Kumari also said that her husband does not realize the importance of these organizations. She stated that

we need people in a funeral. Hundreds of people from surrounding villages and also relatives from faraway places participate in the last day of a funeral, and the Death Benevolent Society would provide food and drinks for the crowd and take care of the burial rituals. Members have to organize, engage and participate in funeral activities.

She said, “my husband neither goes to meetings, nor takes part in compulsory tasks assigned to members by the Death Benevolent Society.”

Women, more than men, seem to trust community support during an emergency and like to develop contingency plans for the future. Sriyantha said that women have more responsibilities during funerals and public events and women’s strength is the network that they build with other women and villagers in general in the village. Some men, as well as some women in the village look at women’s inherent desire to get together and gossip, rather than to run an institution.

Women in contemporary Nelibewa display a high-level of ability in social networking. Lakmali Hemachandra, in a casual conversation, mentioned that women’s empowerment is mostly based on their ability to network. There are many committees and organizations that women have created in the village. Women have different neighborhood associations to help each other in need: These include Bath Samithiya, Mahila Samithiya and Wedihiti Samithiya. As discussed above, they also participate in the main (traditional) organizations in the village.

Kumari said there are many small organizations that women have created within the village to get together. She views these organizations as positive platforms for women to learn from each other, help each other and release the stress of family life. Kumari was not happy that her husband views these organizations as women’s excuse to not perform their household duties, as well as a chance for them to engage in “women talk”. Bath Samithiyas are the most popular neighborhood organizations that women have created in recent years. There are several Bath Samithiya formed by women in Nelibewa. Kumari said her mother is also in a Bath Samithiya. Kumari would like to join the Bath Samithiya in which her mother is involved because

that will give her a way to associate with her mother more. Bath Samithiyas have become safer gathering places for women to get together, express themselves, and be themselves in many ways.

Mahesh, a thirty-two year old villager, said that his mother is also involved in one of the organizations (Bath Samithiyas) and these organizations produce more negative results than positive. He criticized women's neighborhood associations for gathering twice a month, organizing pleasure trips, sharing gossip, wasting time and performing different arts in the meetings as "stupid and fake" activities of women without any "productive work". He questioned the diverse activities organized by the Bath Samithiyas, which are formed with the goal of providing a meal or two at a member's household during a funeral or in other difficult times.

Soma a sixty eight year old woman, who is actively involved in *Wedihiti Samithiya*, *Mahila Samithiya* and *Bath Samithiya* had a different perspective about these associations. She said, "we help each other in hard times. It does not have to be a funeral, but we help when a family member is sick too". Mahesh complained that the *Bath Samithiyas* cause social divisions in the village because before *bath samithiyas*, women used to get together when anyone in the village was in trouble, but now they only support their member's families. Soma completely disagreed and provided some examples where they helped some other villagers in need. According to her, the *samithiyas* not only help their members, but also other villagers who are in need of help.

Strong social networking contributes to a strong public life for women. Most of these women's associations meet in private homes. They decide on the house for the next meeting at the end of every meeting. Nanda, a sixty-five year old unmarried woman, said their meeting location depends on whether women's husbands are supportive of these meetings or not. Mahesh complained that women who are leaders of, or very active in women's groups have husbands who are not masculine enough to make decisions for the family. Mahesh's outside-in

view is not limited to women's associations, but extends to the contemporary social life in the village. He maintained an outsider perspective when he talked about the village life. As someone who completed school education, and is working and travelling around the country as a driver, he appreciates the community life that women had when he was young and what he has heard about community life in the village from earlier generations. However, he could not agree on ways that women have found to get together in the present.

Women use these associations to empower themselves, socially as well as financially. They incorporate micro-financial strategies such as *seettu* into their groups and also apply for micro-loans from banks. Increasing active involvement of women in various associations formed in the village by themselves provides a view into the women's public sphere.

Although there is an inevitable physical-spatial attribute to their public sphere, there is no one physical space for their gatherings. Some women construct their space by annexing additional spaces to their houses. There are various reasons behind adding annexes to the house, discussed below in this chapter. Nonetheless, these spaces serve as meeting places for women's associations.

Funerals stretch over two to three days and rituals continue for seven days. Houses become open for seven days and hundreds of people visit, including friends and family from faraway places. Providing food and room for visitors becomes a huge task and it is impossible for the grieving family to attend to these needs. The Death Benevolent Society usually provides money and raw food items enough to feed the guests, soon after they hear about the death. The Death Benevolent Society also provides lunch on the day of cremation or burial.

Women become responsible for cooking and serving food. These responsibilities, highlighted by informants, are the main reasons for women to maintain a good social network with neighboring women and also for forming *bath samithiyas* and other women's associations.

Mahesh complained that villagers provide meals even though women are not involved in these associations but Nanda, Swarna, Kumari, Ranjani and several other women argued that, as women are getting busy with their jobs and other responsibilities, they need to maintain a strong relationship with other women. Otherwise, they said, they will face problems during funerals, alms givings and other public events which require cooking for a large number of people. Some women referred to a few instances when families had to struggle finding women to cook for these events. Swarna, the secretary of a neighborhood association formed with the main purpose of providing meals during difficult times said, “soon, there will be a time, you have to hire professionals to cook. That is why we are getting organized before that.”

Kumari complained that she has to carry children, baby food to feed them and other children’s items when she has to take part in these events. Her concern was that if she does not participate, she will be helpless and get shamed during her own hard times, like a death. Responding to the question if she finds it a bother to participate in these events Kumari stressed, “not at all, that is great! I could go to those places, meet other women and have some social time also. Otherwise I will go mad dealing with issues at home”. Stories of the women who participate in women’s associations explain how women create opportunities to develop their social life, along with a public sphere, out of the responsibilities they are assigned, or simply developed by themselves.

### **Transformation of Spaces by Women**

Nanda (sixty-nine year old) said that, when she was young, most of the households in the village had larger sheds without walls to store firewood; some houses had sheds to park their bullock carts. These spaces were used for cooking during public events and these places were

the primary places for women to get together, while front porches and “*pilas*” became places for men to sit and socialize.

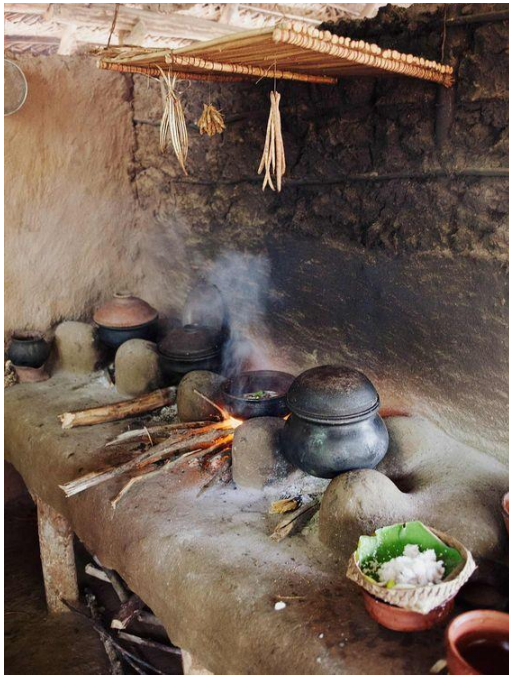


Figure 15: A traditional Sri Lankan village kitchen

Source: Pinterest



Figure 16: Women using mortar and pestle

Source: <http://exploresrilanka.lk/2014/02/kitchen-past/>

My grandparents had a shed larger than their entire house with two bedrooms, a living room and kitchen. It was certainly too large to store firewood; part of it was used to park their bullock cart. The rest of the shed was occupied by a *kurahan gala* (grinding stone used to grind grains), *miris gala* (a flat stone and a stone roller used to make chili paste), *wangediya* (mortar and pestle) and other kitchen equipment. It was an extension of the kitchen where most preparation work was done while cooking was done in the kitchen. Nanda explains:

The kitchen was a small factory when I was young, we did most of what we now do using machines by our hands. Women were advised to engage in those activities. Our elders believed that this small kitchen-factory gives all the exercises that [even] pregnant women need and it makes delivery of baby easy.

Henegedara Kiri Amma (ninety-six years old) is the most senior woman living in Ambawaththa neighborhood. She complained that pregnant women today are very lazy and this causes too much pain during labor. “How were your grandmother and other women in this village able to give birth to 10-15 kids?” she asked. She also replied: “because women not only worked in their kitchen but also in farms with their husbands”. According to her, women did hard work and that was a good way to keep them healthy.

Most of these large sheds outside houses were used for multiple purposes, but, the commonly called *dara maduwa* (shed for firewood) or *karaththa maduwa* (shed for carts) had disappeared by the early 1990s. My grandmother’s shed, which had a thatched roof, was one of the last sheds of that kind in the village; it was torn down after she passed away in 1993 by her son because this family neither wanted to thatch the roof periodically, nor maintain a big firewood storage. By this time, most households had smaller firewood storage sheds in place of multi-purpose sheds where women in the family or in the neighborhood met and socialized.

Due to the disappearance of these sheds, the villagers had to install temporary shelters attached to the kitchen during public cooking events, i.e., in private houses. I have experienced that men informally refer to these newly built sheds attached to the kitchen as “women’s sheds” or “cooking sheds”.

In recent years, women have tried to build permanent structures annexed to their houses. Ranjani added a shed to the house saying that her kitchen is too small for a few people to get together and cook. The shed, she added, is almost about 4 times as large as her kitchen. She mentioned that she could use it to cook for events when neighbors participate in cooking. Adding another function, when relatives visit her house during the Sinhala new year, women sit in this new place.





*Figure 17: Recently annexed sheds for the use of cooking during gatherings at homes*

Soma (sixty-five year old) and Nanda (sixty-eight year old) are two unmarried sisters, who lived with their mother until she passed away in 2014. Her mother was ninety eight years old when she passed away. Many village women used to come to see her a few times a week before she passed away. Another village woman who is also named Soma said that she liked to spend some leisurely time at Soma and Nanda's place every day as a respect to the most senior woman who lived in the village and also because that place was peaceful. "Men in this village are always unhappy when women get together and talk but there is no man in this house" she laughed and continued: "so, this house is more free than other houses for women. There is no one to remind us of household chores that we do anyway".

Nanda is an active member of women's organizations in the village. Most of the women's associations in the neighborhood hold their monthly or bi-weekly meetings in Soma and Nanda's house. Although there are very few families where the head of the household is not a man, Nanda is the head of her family, but her youngest brother who lives in Colombo will inherit the land and the house they live in after their mother passes away, because according to village tradition, the youngest son inherits the parents' house.

Although most of the houses in the village have groundwater supply, or pipe-borne water after the new community water project, water in Nanda's and Soma's house is considered high-quality drinking water by some neighborhood women. So, they fetch drinking water at least once a day in the afternoon. When women come to fetch water, they do not forget to stop to have a chat, chew betel, visit grandmother as everyone in the village called her, or have tea if it is tea time. Some women bring excess food or snacks they have to this house, so they can share with other women. All these women who stop by or visit this house meet each other in the backyard. Due to all these reasons, Nanda and Soma decided that they want to build a shed.

They said they thought of annexing a semi-public space to the house like my mother who had built an additional space to cook during public events at home. Yet, they did not have enough financial resources. Nanda thus convinced her brother who lives in Colombo to annex a shed to the house so that their mother can rest and talk to people who visit her. Now they have this space where women sit and talk even though the mother is no longer the center of their gatherings.

Although adding new semi-public spaces to houses has become a trend in the village, initiated and carried out by women, not every such space is actively used as Nanda's and Soma's "shed." Nonetheless, most of the other families have made new additions their houses, building a new public space for women during public events at homes. Karunawathie has built a detached shed and she is using half of it to store firewood. Talking about it, she reminded that

“this is not a new thing, every house had sheds like this 20-30 years ago,” but the materials they use now are not the same that were used in the past. Today these structures are constructed with bricks, metal screens, wood and roofing materials such as tin and asbestos, whereas the old structures had been built with mud, wood and coconut thatched materials. Karunawathie recalled that the main house was separated from the kitchen in traditional houses and when people started building brick houses with tiled roofs they also followed the same structure. Even today, house designs in the village do not incorporate a dining area or living room with the kitchen and it helps in maintaining gendered socialization within the domestic spaces since women are assigned with cooking. This space in-between the kitchen and the house used to be a common space for women to socialize during special events at homes. Since women also earn money, now they have more agency in changing the design of house and include new parts they want in their house. Ranjani is building a whole new house.

These stories elaborate how women use their agency to create their own (female) public spaces. These places that women create to socialize with other women are associated with their houses, but do not fit in within any classification of space from any Western sense.

The next chapter will discuss how women use their agency to make changes in what is expected from them based on their gender, as well as how they apply the changes in order to achieve more power in negotiating spaces in the village.

## **CHAPTER 4: FEMINIZATION OF NELIBEWA: WOMEN AS AGENTS OF TRANSFORMATION**

As mentioned above, the *gamas* in Sri Lanka have always been in transition. It is the discourse that privileges the urban that has marginalized the *gama* as static and traditional. Despite the remote location of Nelibewa, major national and global changes such as colonization, industrialization, urbanization, capitalism, and globalization have all influenced and transformed its spatial organization, at different levels. Yet the resultant transformations were negotiated and finally produced from within the *gama*. This chapter focuses on how women transformed Nelibewa.

Building on Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems perspective, Nihal Perera (1999) argues that the incorporation of Ceylon into the World-System in the mid-nineteenth century required the transformation of its space. Although Nelibewa was not directly incorporated into the modern world-system or the capitalist world-economy through the creation of plantations or mines, the development of the larger Ceylon and its economy through the colonization and incorporation into the world-economy influenced Nelibewa, and most villages. The hegemony of European modern thinking and culture, or the mental colonialism, was more long lasting than mere physical or economic colonization.

Along with these transformations, as highlighted in the second chapter, Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders hegemonized the ideal of Sinhala-Buddhist womanhood in the nineteenth century. According to Gananath Obeyesekere (1972;1975) and Kumari Jayawardena (1992), this ideal was constructed as part of the nationalist ideology developed in the fight against colonialism. These values, although not in totality, have infiltrated into remote villages such as Nelibewa. To some extent, these national discourses have transformed the gender roles in both domestic and public spheres in the village. Yet some aspects of this ideal womanhood are also changed in their adaptation.

Newton Gunasinghe (1996) demonstrates how urbanization and industrialization followed colonization and influenced changes in the socio-cultural structures of the village, including some material aspects such as the fertility rate. Sandya Hewamanne (2008) points to the transformation of gendered norms with women migrating to work in foreign factories built in urban areas of Sri Lanka. Michele Gamburd (2002) discusses the empowerment of women caused by the labor migration abroad, especially to the Middle East. She focuses on the transformation that takes place in Neyagama, a village in Sri Lanka.

As the previous chapter reveals, rural women were never limited to domestic spaces due to the reproductive roles they play. Their domestic role as mothers and the role (or the lack of it) in the public sphere of the village have, in fact, played a significant role in the transformation of the spatial organization of the village. Although thought of as agents for the transmission of culture from generation to generation, the large majority of Sri Lankan women move, after marriage, to their husband's villages. Living in a different village and culture than the one in which they grew up makes women adopt different cultural values, although this difference is erased in larger discourses under the assumption that the larger national culture is homogenous. Yet at the personal level, this is a significant difference that women have to come to terms with and negotiate. It gets much worse when the newlywed has to live in their mother-in-law's house. Instead of directly transmitting the culture from one generation to the next, they have to perform an important role in mixing, hybridizing, and diversifying cultural practices in villages.

In this context, in this chapter, I will discuss how women employ their agency in the context of some national and global socio-economic processes and discourses in order to challenge the culturally assigned gender roles and empower themselves. Here I include women's migration to urban areas and emigration to other countries for work and how women have used these challenges to transform gender roles within both domestic and public spheres. I will also investigate how women have responded to new educational opportunities for women

and the drawing of men into the civil war in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka. In short, this chapter will examine how women's, and also the villagers', responses to major socio-economic changes at national and global levels have affected the transformation of gender roles and relations in Nelibewa. I will focus on how these responses have transformed the socio-spatial organization of the village at domestic and village scales.

### **Education, Employment, Modernity**

Women in Nelibewa are more educated today. Seventy percent of women between 20 and 40 years of age have sat for the GCE O/L examination, a national examination held at 10<sup>th</sup> grade. About six percent of women in the village have internal or external bachelor's degrees currently. It is not the old village with poor and illiterate people that the urbanites used to talk about and novelists used to write about (Wickramasinghe, 1940, Palansuriya, 1948, Dissanayake, 1993, Ranjan, 1999 and Kahandagama, 1988). Women's education within the formal education system has transformed the gender relations and space in the village.

Rajitha, a thirty-one -year-old married man with two children, observes the impact of education: "Some of the women are more educated than their husbands, so, they deserve an equal position as their husbands and also they can educate their kids and make the village a better place." Gunadasa, a seventy-one -year old man in the village, maps out the generational change:

Unlike our time, today, women are educated and employed. They manage everything in their families. I was the boss in my family but my daughter-in-law is the boss in my son's family although they both have the same education qualifications and both of them are school teachers. In order to have a successful family, today, the men have to listen to their wives. The world is coming to its end soon.

The change is evident in the increase in the proportion of women in social organizations in Nelibewa. According to forty-three-year old Sriyantha, Secretary of the Dayaka Samithiya,

“women are also educated today, so they participate and make valuable contributions to village associations.”

The tipping point is not clearly evident, in large part because education comes in different modes and forms. Formal Western education provided through government schools and other educational institutions is what is commonly considered as education. The three men quoted above, belonging to different age groups, accept that most women in the village today have a good education. Women's education is influencing both their decision-making abilities and their social status. The old Sri Lankan adage, “women's intelligence is as long as the handle of a kitchen spoon” (*genunge nuwana hendi mite digalu*), is becoming invalid as women are pursuing school and higher education. However, it is still used to degrade women's abilities to make decisions. Nelibewa women are proving that if the women who lacked involvement in the social sphere and public spaces made “poor” decisions in the past, it was most likely due to a lack of access to education, which was a result of the old patriarchal structure. .

There is no observable direct prevention of education for women in Nelibewa and in *gamas* across Sri Lanka. Women were neither highly discriminated against in regard to educational opportunities, nor considered unsuitable for education in the village. Perhaps the pressure was cultural: their education was neglected or they were pressured to marry soon by their parents and the community. Sriyantha stressed that education, in general, was neither considered important by families, nor valued in village culture. Their life struggles were different compared to today and to those of their urban counterparts. Their notion of success and happiness did not include formal education or literacy as their lives were centered around the survival process, satisfying the needs that they defined for themselves. Even during colonialism and the rise of anti-colonialism, which enhanced the social awareness and access to education in Colombo and other cities, villagers did not have much opportunity for education. Besides, they had poor access to government employment opportunities that required formal education. Sriyantha said neither his father, Kirimudiyanse (seventy-five years old) nor his mother

Ranmenike (Seventy-one year-old) have studied up to tenth grade and passed Senior School Certificate (SSC) examination. Yet, both of them could not get government employment.

Kirimudiyanse did not get a job because his parents were not married. For Sriyantha, this was a false reason by the government in order to not employ him. In those days, only the influential people received government jobs. Ranmenike's parents did not push her to get a job because they also thought that only the elite or people with politicians' support got jobs. Bandara Menike said her education was not supported by anybody in her family; rather, they preferred her to stay home and take care of her younger siblings because her mother had to help her father in the rice fields and also because her mother was pregnant most of the time with Bandara Menike's seven younger siblings. She said her older brother and sister were neither encouraged nor interested in pursuing education. Therefore, they got involved in providing food for the family. However, her younger siblings --despite their gender-- had more access to education; their older siblings supported them and they were relatively free from family responsibilities.

The first group of villagers to complete school education and receive government employment included both men and women. By the late 1990s, the girls in Nelibewa had begun to pursue higher education and the men had begun to marry women with education. Here, I refer to women completing high school and above. Prior to this, most women did not go beyond tenth grade. In turn, the coming of educated women influenced the village.

According to Mahesh, a thirty-two-year-old married man, men in the village marrying educated women has both positive and negative impacts. Educated women can teach their children well and that improves the socio-economic situation of the family and the village. This observation is based on the idea that women are responsible for educating their children. Rajitha, a thirty-year-old man working in the Sri Lankan Army, also said that he feels comfortable when thinking that his wife, Malee has completed her school education. She can help their kids with homework and guide them to receive a higher education which both of them



could not achieve. Most of the parents in the village have the dream of seeing their kids getting a better education than them, but fathers largely rely on mothers to educate their kids. Kumari, a forty-two-year-old woman with two children, said that although she could not complete school education due to her marriage, her only dream is to see her children do well in school and go for higher education. She said

My husband does not bother to teach a single letter to our kids and thinks it's the mother's duty to teach children. I am glad that I have at least this level of education (she has sat for the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) examination, but did not pass) to direct my kids on the right path.

In general, children of educated mothers achieve greater academic success in the village.

As discussed in the previous chapter, women are increasingly becoming more involved in community organizations and actively participating in the making of decisions that concern the village. This change is highly influenced by greater education and exposure to the world gained by women. Quite directly, as women are more concerned about children and their education, when they organize events, children can also participate and learn more. Women increasingly get involved in making decisions that favor children's growth and wellbeing.

Women's involvement and direction of village organizations, particularly their influence on decision-making, are also related to women's welfare and safety. Village organizations work with local politicians and government institutions in requesting amenities and grants and consulting and directing these programs to improve the quality of the socio-economic environment in the village. When the government opts to improve a local road, the village organization decides and negotiates which road requires upgrading first.

Women's voice in village organizations also enables them to request and divert grants and programs for the benefit of women, thus developing a more inclusionary environment for women. For example, women in the village asked the Electricity Board to install a street light at the handiya, the road intersection near Kohok Kade. The reason is girls and women who work in

garment factories wait at the *handiya* in early morning hours, when it is dark, for transportation provided by the garment factory. They return around midnight as well.

Increasingly, most of the government field officers such as Grama Niladhari (village level administrative officer), agricultural officer, Samurdhi (welfare) Officer, and Development Officers appointed by the Divisional secretariat are educated women from the same village or nearby villages. As this demonstrates, women have achieved a comparatively higher level of education and decision-making power in the village. This also increases the respect and the trust about women's ability to make such decisions and direct programs.

Namali is the Agricultural Officer for Nelibewa and Dinusha, who is from Nelibewa, is a Grama Niladhari of a nearby village. Both of these women shared that working as field officers within the same village that they grew up in has elevated their social status. However, some villagers still doubt and question Namali and Dinusha's ability to make decisions because they are women. One villager told Namali, "these small girls who went to school in white uniforms are coming back in sarees to train us how to farm". She introduces new techniques and collaborates to solve local issues. Many women in the village find it easy to relate to and work with new officers, most of whom are females and from the same village.

Some men in the village believe that the education of women creates distance between women and their husband's village. Mahesh said his wife did not like to live in the village. Ranjani, a woman we both know, did not take part in community events in the village like other women because she was the only educated woman in the neighborhood before her family moved to the outskirts of Nelibewa twelve years ago.

Most women who have recently migrated as wives to Nelibewa are slow to get assimilated into the village. Some villagers view the main reason for this as women's education. Ranjani said that she understands the importance of community work but, as she was employed, she had a public sphere she developed with similarly educated men and women

outside the village. Therefore she did not have the same urge as other women to get together.

In her words:

Although women get together and engage in some community work, their main focus is not working. That is the way they hang out. I did not have the time or the interest for such gathering but I always tried to make a contribution when an important event such as a death takes place in the village,

Although some women are not interested in participating in community events and have public spheres at their work places, they still expand their social network by forming women's organizations in the village. Although most of the members in these new women's organizations do not have a formal job, the office-holders in these organizations are women with higher level of education. The educated women are better able to organize events and negotiate with external agencies such as government officers and banks. Women have their own micro-financial schemes associated with the neighborhood women's organizations. Regional development banks have also initiated women's micro-finance schemes to support women with small loans.

Most rural communities experience out-migration, particularly with the new trends of higher education and urban employment. Although this is not yet a large-scale trend in Nelibewa, some stories in the village attribute it to women's education. Mahesh believes that the main reason for Ranjani's family to move out of the village is that she was educated; she thought living in a poor neighborhood was not good for her family's social status. He believes that their move encouraged Ranjani's brother-in-law and his wife, Sepalika to also move out of the village. Sepalika's perspective on moving out of the village is discussed in the previous chapter.

Although the percentage of villagers pursuing higher education is still low and patrilocal residences are common in the village, a few men in the village have moved out of it after receiving well-paid employment outside the village. Chaminda, the only villager to become a

lawyer, still owns a house in Nelibewa, but he and his family moved to Kuliyaipitiya, the regional town center where the High Court is.

Educated and employed women who get married to men in the village have a tendency to move out of the village. Mahesh's wife is an educated woman who likes to live in her comfort zone without moving to her husband's village. Ranjani said if she was not educated and employed, she would not have had the ability to convince her husband to move out to an area of the village with electricity and better road access.

Although education has enabled women to out-migrate, the numbers are still very small. Yet out-migration is causing changes in the spatial organization of the village. The moving out of two families has created two abandoned houses in the village, causing social and spatial disconnection within the village, according to Ranjani's previous neighbors. According to Herath Banda (62):

Both Weerathilaka and Wijerathna lived in the center of this neighborhood, Ambawaththa. Their parents and the entire family lived here and they were a part of this village. Their wives made them move out from this neighborhood because they thought this poor neighborhood is not good enough for their social status. I do not blame them because we do not have proper roads, electricity or other facilities in the village but, look at what has happened to this village now. This place looks even worse with two abandoned houses located in the middle of few acres of land in the middle of the neighborhood. We feel like the village is divided into two separate sections"

Although the education of women who are married to village men affects the socio-cultural organization of the village including out-migration, most villagers believe that the education of girls in the village does not cause the village to change. Mahesh simply added that whether girls in the village get educated or not, they leave the village. In this sense, education only enhances the lives of these girls. Yet, according to my observations, women's education and employment cause matrilocal marriages. When an educated woman gets married, she has a higher ability to live in her own village after marriage.

Namali who completed her bachelor's degree externally and received a job as an Agrarian Officer in the Panduwasnuwara-East Divisional Secretariat Division refused to migrate

to her husband's village in Anuradhapura, about 150 miles away from Nelibewa. For her, this village is far away from her work and she stayed with her parents. Her husband who works in Colombo visits her on weekends at her parent's house in Nelibewa. The couple is now building a new house in the village.

Newly-married, educated women in Nelibewa prefer to not live with their parents-in-law as in traditional *deega vivaha* (patrilocal marriages). "This is the problem. When women are educated, they no longer want to become a traditional wife who shares a house with her parents-in-law" said Gamahamine, referring to her daughter-in-law. Soma, sixty-eight-year-old woman, said that she and her husband moved to another house because she and her daughter-in-law could not cohabitate with each other. She said "in our time, even if our mother-in-law treated us bad, we had to live with the in-laws, but now these so called educated women want to control their husbands. So, they do not like to live with their husband's parents". These two older women, both mothers-in-law, are accusing the educated, younger generation of women of not wanting to live within the same structure that supports patriarchy.

Young women's struggle is not only against the patriarchal structure of the village and at home, purely defined in terms of meanings attached to sexual difference, but also against the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti, 1988). They also struggle against the "traditional" dominance of the mother-in-law and the husband's family, which can somewhat be related to the patriarchal structure but cannot be totalized.

The village is not static, but "modernizing." The coverage of the electricity grid is increasing and the road networks are expanding. Central Electricity Board has extended the grid to the remote parts of the village. The number of houses and the land occupancy is increasing, requiring new roads, electricity and other utilities to every corner of the village. The households are also transforming from extended to nuclear families.

It has become very common in recent years for husband's parents to move to another house built on the same land or another lot they own in the village within few years of their son's

marriage, sometimes as quick as a mere few months later. Soma and her husband Gunadasa decided to build another house on a lot they own near the mountain and move there because they wanted their grandchildren to live in the original location with electricity and better road connection. This trend of women preferring to live in nuclear families has caused an increase in the number of houses in the village.

Although living in separate houses, parents usually continue the close connection with their son's family. Even though there are households where extended families live together, domestic sphere and designs are also changing drastically. Chandani (48), a mother of two children said,

I work, so, I cannot cook the way [and at times] my mother-in-law expects me to cook. Therefore my mother-in-law was not happy with me and we had small arguments. As a result, she asked us to build another kitchen outside the house for her where she can cook in her style. Sometimes, we share food. We do not have problems. This way is easy. I do not have time to argue over small matters.

House designs are changing along with the changes in women's roles. Some educated women have gas cookers, rice cookers, and other electric utensils for their kitchens. This prevents sharing the same kitchen because older women in the village prefer cooking with firewood and without electric equipment. The younger women are also protective of their equipment.

As women get more educated and employed, it creates a huge need for family and community to support child care, cooking, and other household activities. However, in Nelibewa, as women get more educated, they become more individualistic and look for more privacy within (new) nuclear families and households. This creates more burden for women in regard to childcare and domestic responsibilities because when they live as nuclear families in private households, they do not get as much support as they got from their extended families and neighbors, a topic that is discussed in more detail in the next sections.

In short, educated women have largely established their dominance over the domestic sphere. This is highly supported by employment that provides economic independence and

ability to invest in the transformations that they wish to see. Both the women who migrated to the village after marriage and those who grew up in it have both transformed the village and its spaces through the building of new houses for nuclear families, new kitchens, abandoning houses, and illuminating areas that have come to greater use by females. The educated are not the only agents of change, but women, in general, are finding their own strategies to negotiate power in both domestic and public spheres and spaces. The next sections delve into a few more categories of women who have changed the village.

### **Domestic Work in the Middle East**

Much like the changes caused in the village by educated women, migration of women for work was not planned. Getting paid for the same tasks they perform at home, now in some other country was an unexpected opportunity that emerged for Sri Lankan women in the early 1980s. Gamarala, Gunadasa, Kumari, Ranjani, Soma, Sriyantha and Weerathilaka mentioned that migrating to the Middle East became a trend in Nelibewa in late-1980s and 1990s. The desire to achieve the dream life, more immediately the dream house, materialized the process that appeared possible.

The first to find out about potential labor migration were the women who had relatives in other villages where labor migration was taking place. Women who had already migrated to the Middle East mainly as domestic workers, commonly called “housemaids,” acted as informal agents connecting their relatives to their masters in the Middle East. Kamala who worked as a migrant worker for more than twenty years and made about 8 trips to 3 different countries said one of her cousins who worked as a housemaid found that her master required another domestic worker for his house. The cousin informed her master that she can provide a trustworthy maid and invited Kamala. Although there are employment agencies that help find

employment and government institutions that provide, regulate labor migration, female labor migration came to villages through informal connections.

One of the main wishes of these women was to achieve their dream houses. “Currently, I live in a house with my parents-in-law and sister-in-law. My dream is to live in a separate house with my husband and children because living in extended families causes small arguments everyday” said Sudarma, a mother of two children. Her husband got a loan and laid the foundation for a new house on his parent’s land but their family income was not enough to build it up. She said “My dream is to work few years in the Middle East to earn money to pay off the loan, build four walls, and put up a roof”. Her obstacle to going abroad for work was her 2- and 4-year-old children. She thought that her husband alone would not be able to look after and educate their children. Women’s desire to live in nuclear families in a separate household – discussed above— is a roadblock to go out of the village to earn additional income for their families. Fortunately, Sudarma had the support of her extended family who looked after her children, but she believed that children’s education is not a responsibility that she can transfer to someone else. Her mother-in-law also worked in the Middle East for few years and that is how she funded building the house that they all currently live. So, her mother-in-law displayed a strong sense of ownership and dominance over the household space.

Consumption patterns and trends draw rural women to paid labor. In the United States in the 1950s, Dolores Hayden (2005, 49 ) writes, “more and more women joined the paid labor force as the suggestible housewife needed to be both a frantic consumer and a paid worker to keep up with family’s bills”. According to her, white male workers had already achieved the dream houses by then in suburbia where “patriarchal fantasies” (Hayden, 2005) can be carried out.

The situation was different in rural Sri Lanka. In Nelibewa, the achieving of a modern house became a priority in the early-1980s. A modern house is one built out of “permanent” materials such as bricks and cement with baked-clay tiled roof, with the help of masons and



capenters. By the early-1980s, the family income from agriculture was not enough to build the dream house according to the villagers' stories. Some men in the village migrated to urban areas for work and constructed their own houses. Some educated villagers who got government jobs built modern houses. The number was very low, but it created a trend of building modern houses in the village.

Modern house became a way to achieve a new social status; that was not easy and not available to everyone. Only government workers, elite and successful migrant workers in urban areas were able to achieve a "good" house. Modern house thus enabled a new social stratification besides the existing stratifications based on caste and *gamkarayo* (the elite who owned large areas of land). The addition of few modern houses changed the entire perception of houses in the village. This changed the socio-cultural value system in the village making it necessary for every family to build a modern house for the inhabitants to be accepted in the village as a non-deprived family.

International capitalism created employment opportunities for cheaper labor in "developing countries". Oil producing countries created the demand for female labor. It was exciting for women to learn that it is possible to earn a higher wage for performing familiar domestic tasks in the Middle East.

Most of the returnees from the Middle East in Nelibewa said their primary motive was also to build a modern house. Kamala recalled that it was hard to convince her husband Rala about migration. Yet, they were struggling at that time to build a modern house and Raja's income from agriculture and unskilled labor was not enough. Rala finally agreed to Kamala's request because her migration seemed to be the only way out of poverty and gaining social mobility through building a modern house. Currently, more than sixty percent of modern houses in the village are financed by women who work in the Middle East.

Many women followed this path and did more than building a modern house. Kusuma who worked in Middle East for Fifteen years was very proud that she was able to build a

modern house and get her daughter married with a dowry to a good family. “Rich people in this village had the idea that only they could build modern houses but women have proved it wrong” she said; then she laughed out very loud. The new house did not simply change the spaces and representations of individual families, but changing from traditional mud houses to brick houses with a tile roof indicated the change of social organization, gender roles, and the spatial organization of the village.

### **The Impact of the Dream House & Modern Appliances**

Women in Nelibewa have fulfilled the wish to climb the social ladder by building a modern house which is their dream house, although it might have taken years and other villagers view that their families have fallen to disarray. Physical changes to the village brought about by select families building a modern house, further extended by acquiring expensive and luxurious household items, have created a competition among households in the village and disturbed the extant hierarchies within the village. The elite and other upper class people in the village who did not like to send their women abroad thinking it is a disgrace to sell women’s labor to Middle Easterners are looking for other ways to earn more money and modernize their lives.

Prior to this change, building and maintenance of houses in the village were carried out through the pooling of communal labor. Today, most of the houses in the village are built in kiln-baked bricks and roofed with baked clay-tiles using expert labor. In the early 1990s, only 4 out of twelve were built in bricks with tile roofs; the others were built in clay and coconut thatched roofs. Today, fifteen out of sixteen are brick houses with tiled roofs and the other is a brick house with a tin roof in Ambawaththa, one of the “remote” neighborhoods. Remote does not mean very far as the whole village is very small, but this house is in an area of Nelibewa that did not have access to electricity (2008) and internal roads (1996) until recently.



*Figure 18: A modern house (left), a traditional house but with tin roof (middle) and a toilet(right)*

The “traditional” houses in the village were built with locally available materials such as timber, mud, cow dung and thatched coconut leaves. Then, building a new house used to be a social activity, explained in the previous chapter. Women and men had different roles to perform in house construction and repair. With the advent of building “modern” houses, building a house became a personal and family achievement than a communal activity. House which once had been a process that involved the villagers is now a social status indicator that triggers competition among villagers. The maintenance of these modern houses also do not require communal labor as for traditional houses. Communal labor was also a reason for women to get together which is non-existent anymore.

The bases of communal life and their spaces are also changing. In traditional houses, the kitchens were separate from the main house; it was the same even when brick houses with tile roofs first came to the village. Houses built in the past decade have the kitchen included in the main house and is comparatively smaller in size too. Some use gas to cook instead of firewood which required the separation of the kitchen due to smoke and soot. Most of the traditional kitchen utensils like the sit-on coconut scraper are replaced with smaller household

items, many are electric powered. Some functions such as processing rice and other raw food items are now done at commercial mills in the village which are also new. Many women buy already processed ingredients and food.



*Figure 19: A traditional mud house with thatched roof*

Source: Ministry of Housing and Constructions in Sri Lanka

The other reason to have a smaller kitchen is most of the families are small nuclear families and the kitchen is used by one woman. Most women said that they like to cook in their own ways so cooking together every day causes problems. Newly married women who were planning to move to a separate household, or dreaming of such move, said that they want a separate kitchen more than a separate house. Sudarma said that she wakes up every morning at 3am to cook for her husband and kids: “I cook food for breakfast and lunch together and leave the kitchen for my mother-in-law and sister-in-law”. Her dream to go abroad for work has grown with her desire to build a separate house with (her own) kitchen that can be used in her own ways and provide enough food and necessities for her children.

Along with the modern house, women also build a private well because fetching water is always a woman’s chore. As discussed in the previous chapter, public wells have been a main place of

socialization for women in the village. On the one hand, public wells are disappearing due to the construction of private wells; currently more than seventy five percent of houses have their own wells. On the other hand, disappearing public bathing places also creates the need for private wells. With the disappearance of public wells, women's opportunity to meet each other also gets slimmer. In addition to bringing money to build a modern house, women also brought modern household items from the Middle East. Home theater systems and DVD players became a very popular in the village in the late-1990s. When mothers brought these new electronic items, children, especially boys became the center of attraction of the village, as their friends and other boys gathered to watch television and use other equipment in their houses.

This caused competition: The elite who want to be the most modern and be on top of trends in the village did not have access to the income or the household goods from the Middle East. Hence, they began to sell some of their belongings and/or trees on their property to buy these new items. Many elite bought these items from the women who work abroad. Some women began informal businesses, selling and trading household items they brought.

While some women were entrepreneurial, some spent all the money they earned in the Middle East, finishing sooner than they thought. Most wanted to go back for two or more years. Some families sold or pawned the equipment they brought as financial needs arose; discussed below. Some hope that they could earn enough to reclaim the pawned items when they return to the Middle East. Some women got loans from moneylenders and neighbors with the promise of buying some modern items from the Middle East and ship them. Going to the Middle East , earning wages and selling household goods gave the women the ability to negotiate with moneylenders and rich villagers as well; they became creditworthy and resourceful.

At the same time, modern household equipment became popular in the village and by bringing these to the village the women who worked in the Middle East set a new trend; it transformed the village. Women brought electrical items such as televisions and refrigerators back to the village from the Middle East even before there was electricity in the village. Some

villagers found ways to use these electrical items with rechargeable batteries. Some others used these items only as show pieces.

They displayed all the expensive “modern” equipment they brought including refrigerators, grinders, tea sets and other kitchen items in their living rooms. When women brought furniture such as couches, they used to cover them with the sarees and make other seats available for members of the household and villagers to sit. Only distinguished guests could sit on these chairs; otherwise they are for show. Through these, women created a powerful role for them in bringing “modernity” to the village. Yet it is a hybrid of their kind, one they produced at home.

Social stratification based on caste and other social factors rapidly changed because of this new modernity. Teenage sons and daughters of migrant mothers became the agents creating new trends among the younger generation due to their accessibility to technology and fashion. Changes that women brought in regard to houses, household equipment, and fashions still continue to transform the village socially and spatially, but the absence of the women and their taking over breadwinner’s role in families created a huge gender tension within the patriarchal system of the village.

### **The Absence of Women: Tensions Among Gender Roles**

Gamburd (2002) observes that “The migration of female labor to the Middle East has created many challenges to local gender ideologies”. One such impacts was caused by the women’s absence from the village. Women performed various roles at home and also in semi-public and public spaces. In Nelibewa the boundary between domestic and public sphere was not clearly separated; they infiltrated each other. Similarly, although public spaces can be identified as gendered. The boundary of men’s public spaces and women’s public spaces was also blurry and did not create two distinct dichotomies; they were overlapping each other.

Childcare was considered a responsibility of women but with a communal aspect to it. Female relatives and neighbors in the village considered taking care of children and feeding them a communal responsibility. When mothers migrated to the Middle East for work, they arranged other women in the village to take care of their children. Kusuma said that she left her daughter with her parents in their village. Chandi said, "I have three sons, so I did not have to worry too much about their safety, but I asked my neighbors to look after my kids". She sent some gifts to her neighbors as a gratitude for taking care of her children.

As this reveals, men were not ready to accept and to perform domestic responsibilities left by their women. Kumari said, when her mother went abroad, her father did not change his daily chores. Hence, Kumari and her sister who were under 16 had to take over the responsibilities her mother held at home. Changes in gender roles were neither visible nor existed at the early stages of women's migration to the Middle East.

According to Chandi, asking neighbors to take over some of the motherly responsibilities soon led to dispute. When the neighbors realized that migrant housemaids earn good money in the Middle East, they began to request more favors which ended up in misunderstandings and arguments. Once the first few women who worked in the Middle East began sending money home, bring new trends, and build modern houses, other villages also entered the competition, sometimes developing jealousy and feeling injustice. They no longer wanted to look after the children or help with domestic chores of the women in the Middle East. Mahesh views women going abroad for work as causing a loss of unity in the village. He attributed this change to poor decisions made by women.

Regardless of Mahesh's observations, women's migration has caused the increase of nuclear families and separate households in the village. The village became more family-oriented than communal and domestic roles of men and women became clearly defined. In Hayden's (2005) work too, employed women did not like to live in communal families. In

Nelibewa, these definitions became necessary for the wellbeing of the families and the village community.

However, women working in the Middle East made the village economy a more integral part of larger national and global economies. Social change that followed included changing gender roles and, to a degree, the patriarchy. More employment opportunities for women than for men enabled women to earn more than men, and transferred the breadwinner role from the man to woman.

### **Men's Response to New Domestic Roles and Managing the Domestic Sphere**

As women assumed the breadwinner role, men's role in the family became unsettled. Earlier, women had the help of other women, including the mother, mother-in-law, female relatives, female neighbors, and daughters to take care of the roles they left at home. Yet the subsequent societal changes are making this almost impossible. Men had to take over domestic responsibilities the women left when migrating to the Middle East. Different men responded in different ways to this responsibility.

Siripala and Sugathan are two men who well adapted to most responsibilities their women left and managed the money their wives sent, economically for the betterment of their families. Siripala's wife, Kusuma sent her 10-year old daughter to her parent's home; so Siripala did not have childcare responsibilities. Yet, he continued to do labor work which he used to do for living, and also began constructing a brick house for themselves in his native neighborhood, Ambawaththa. During construction, he did not go to work but provided assistance to construction workers. He negotiated his labor value with the chief mason and reduced the amount of money he paid for construction. Siripala was heavily involved in building his house, and putting his wife's earnings to good use. In his spare time, Siripala landscaped the garden.



The work that Sugathan took over included childcare. He has three children including a mentally challenged daughter. He worked as a mason before his wife migrated, after she began to earn and send money, Sugathan also began to build a “Modern” house. He said that some villagers put him down and questioned his masculinity for sending his wife abroad to earn for the family and for staying home to do “women’s work” such as taking care of kids, gardening and building a house. According to Sugathan, villagers were blind to the fact that he was using his abilities and labor to build his own house with the money his wife sent.

Sugathan is a determined man with strong words for his critics:

I have built houses for rich people, I love designing and building houses. It was a dream to build a house for ourselves with brick walls and a clay tile roof. I did not push my wife to the Middle East. It was her choice at first. Now, we have a beautiful house and other villagers look down at me because they are jealous. Men who cannot build a house and who waste the money their wives earn in Middle east on alcohol are the impotent people. I used the money my wife sent me for a good cause. This house is for our family. My son does not have to worry about building a house, they can develop their lives with what her mother and I have done for them.

Although Siripala and Sugathan took up the challenges posed by changing gender roles due to women’s migration as domestic workers, most men and the patriarchal society in the village could not accept these changes. The men in the village labelled those who took over new domestic responsibilities as women and looked down upon them. Most husbands who could not welcome the fact that women are becoming breadwinners of the family, especially having more money and the managing family budgets, began protesting by demanding their wives to send more money and also by spending the money the wives sent on entertainment. Most men who were left behind began consuming illicit liquor with a group of other men.

It is like a support group: Having a group of alcohol-mates has become the most common way of socializing for most men in the village, according to Gamarala. What they have produced is an alcoholic public sphere where this group of men gather to mostly to drink illicit liquor. These spaces are created, occupied and developed by men, these “men’s alcoholic

public sphere” has become a part of the socio spatial organization of the village; they are not fixed to a particular place, but occur in different places in the village.

Gamburd (2002, 22) conceptualizes the above change in Neyagama: “Men who had lost the culturally-valued role of breadwinner often reasserted their masculinity through all male-male drinking groups”. In Nelibewa too, at least some men’s pride was damaged when women took over the role of breadwinner and they had to perform domestic work labeled as “women’s work”. Gamarala said: “before the 1970s and 80s, men in this village were hard working. *Kasippu* (illicit liquor) is a new invention to soothe men whose pride was damaged by their wives’ migration.

These transformation of gender roles caused tension in the patriarchal system. Yet this was a response to the gender roles established in recent times. According to village elders, although men were given the title of breadwinner, women also participated in agricultural production before incorporating the village into national and global capitalist systems. These stories indicate that the domestic and public spheres were not mutually exclusive and women’s and men’s work were not clearly distinct. It was common for women to be involved in what are now consider “men’s” duties.

The importance of women’s role in filling the gaps and holding the system together became very clear when they became absent from homes. Men could not adapt to the wide variety of “small” roles that women perform. As Kumari said, while her mother was away, her father was unable to look after children’s education and other domestic needs. Kumari and her sister had to take over more mature roles in the family before they could complete their childhood experience. Kumari eloped with a man from the same village after a short love affair, looking for an “ideal” family before finishing the school. She regrets the decision she made and believe that if she received motherly love and did not have to take mother’s responsibilities at home, she might not have taken a decision to elope. Constructed understanding of ideal family,

mother's love and gender roles influenced her decision that affects her future. Her current life struggles is also discussed above in this chapter (see page 54)

Most of the villagers see the failures of socio cultural system of the village as a woman's problem, one created by women's migration, but not due to men's inability to respond to changing gender roles. At the same time, men who accepted the changes and performed women's responsibilities were looked down upon as those who lack masculinity. Villagers even use the term *gani* (woman) or *napunsaka* (impotent) to label such men.

Building a modern house was not only a personal or family level achievement, but these together have changed the landscape and the spatial organization of the village. As discussed above, changing from traditional mud houses to brick houses with a tile roofs has transformed the social organization of the village and its gender roles.

The most common representation of women's empowerment in the village is a modern house with modern household equipment and separate kitchen and an individual groundwater well, sometimes with a water pump, making their domestic space more convenient. They are acquiring a considerable level of power through these physical changes as well as other experiences they gain as they travel and work abroad (see below).

Despite all advances, the position of women was largely negotiated within the extant patriarchal system. In Gamburd's words, "Wage labor for domestic service certainly raised the status of women's work, but women negotiated their new gender roles against a background of preexisting norms and values that limited their power and authority" (2002, 21). Women in the village are not trying to transform the existing patriarchal system by becoming the breadwinners for the families, financially independent, and socially empowered, but these effect the patriarchy. Women also try to maintain the existing patriarchal system (as discussed in the previous chapter) but, in the process, they make adjustments to it, making room for their agency and free will. As women make changes to the system, many disputes arise. Most crucially, the process transforms the patriarchal system in ways that it is difficult to reproduce it the way it was.

## The Notion of “Success” and the Increase of Consumerism

In addition to a modern house for the nuclear family, the new notion of success is represented by the family’s ability to educate children, especially to gain highly-competitive university entrance and government jobs.

Yet this was contradicting the new notions of family planning seeping into the village. Family planning in Sri Lanka goes back to the early twentieth century as part of government programs such as *punchi pawula raththaran* (small family is golden). These programs not only aimed to reduce the number of children per family but also to change the entire image of the “ideal” family made up of parents and two children. This notion also created the need for clearly defined gendered roles for parents in the domestic sphere. Women’s migration, which also began when family planning that supported small nuclear families was introduced to the village was contradicting this middle-class notion of success. and what women were achieving, although extended families may better help women’s migration.

Sriyantha, a government schoolteacher said, “no family has become successful in the village by sending their women to the Middle East; the highest achievement they have is a modern house.” Other villagers who have not migrated do not see these women as successful women or their families as successful. Sriyantha and Mahesh said that these women have only been able to build a house, but can never convert it into a home because their families fell apart in their absence: the husbands became alcoholics, children dropped out of school, teenagers began to use drugs and got into underage marriages.

They also criticized these women for going back to the Middle East again and again and had plenty of advice to offer about how to manage the money they earned without spending to “show off”. Jayanatha said: “they bring the “Saudi [Arabia]” with them when they come back;

they want to live here like they did in Saudi. When the money is over, they have to go back”.

The villagers call all Middle Eastern countries Saudi.

There is a popular saying among the villagers that “when you don’t smell Middle Eastern perfume on them anymore, that is when they will go back”. This statement insists that going to the Middle east is a vicious cycle from which these women and their families cannot escape because they have changed their lifestyles with the new income (habits and values from the Middle East), and these lifestyles cannot be maintained without going back to the Middle East. Kamala, who was back from the Middle East for a vacation during my research, gave her ideas about going back: “I might go back one more time to save some money for my old age and support my older son who is struggling in his life”.

Although the construction of a house was a great achievement for these women, they did not have plans for their livelihoods after returning. In some situations, they were able to build even more modern and big houses than the government employees in the village. They had to spend more money on the maintenance of these houses and to keep up the social status they have achieved. The lack of investments of their earnings and high level of consumerism have created the need to migrate again and again. Yet some like Kamala may be going for different purposes, such as saving for the retirement.

Women themselves got transformed in the Middle East. This change was supported by the financial independence, self-esteem, new responsibilities, new knowledge, and the freedom they experienced. As Gamburd (2002) writes, although female labor is paid much less and they are exploited, the remittances to Sri Lanka are more than the average wages in Sri Lanka. So, the migrant workers do not consider getting paid for domestic activities, for which they never got paid before as exploitation, but as something that produces self-esteem about their ability to contribute to the improvement of the family life. As these transformed women began to return to the village, the village also began to transform and be redefined.

## **Women's Social Empowerment**

Women have different ways of responding --after return-- to the gender-role disputes that occurred in their absence. Some women find their life abroad easier and they return to the Middle East, where they can enjoy more freedom and leisure and also earn more income. Some other women get into the vicious cycle of going abroad to maintain the life they have built in the village. Some women stay at home and find other sources of income, but it is very rare that a woman stay home and take over the role of traditional woman after the transformation of both the village and the woman herself. These women do not try to change the patriarchal system as such, but recognize the oppression and exploitation within the system and try to create their own space within it, perhaps in the margins. This is discussed in the next section.

The transformation of women and their roles is reflected in the society and space in many other ways. Women's domestic role as a mothers, and wives, and their public roles in the village, have received more recognition in the village in their absence. Only some men were capable of adapting to the domestic roles that women used to perform, and children grew up in a temporarily single-parent household without their mother's care. Remittances and gifts sent by mothers in the Middle East provided the household with food and other needs. When the women returned to the village feeling confident and empowered, they in turn transformed the gender roles and spaces.

Most importantly, women realized the value of their own labor, especially when they began to get paid in the Middle East for performing the same domestic tasks they did at home. Even after returning to the village, they know that each and every task they perform has a financial value. Most women who decided not to go back to the Middle East for additional income do ordinary household chores for money, an opportunity that was not available before the transformation. Both Chandra and Kusuma work as babysitters. Chandra asked "I can still work even though I have passed the age limit to work as a housemaid in the Middle East. So

why should I not work?" She lives in the house built with her own money; she also helped two of her sons to begin small businesses. Chandra said that she works because she does not want to depend on her children or anyone else.

Financial independence is another achievement of the women who worked in the Middle East. This gives them more power to negotiate within the domestic sphere. In regard to domestic space, these women have incorporated elements that facilitate female use into the house. Annexing larger kitchen spaces that can be used for cooking for events that involve several women in the neighborhood, as well as attached bathrooms in addition to common outdoor bathrooms, only to be used during nights especially by women are two main examples. The financial independence that the women earned via the Middle East has a huge impact in the village. Now women also achieve financial independence through other common employment opportunities in, for example, garment factories, discussed later in this chapter.

Questioning this achievement, Mahesh stresses that women today are too concerned about money; so they do not participate in community activities. Ranjani said that 15-20 years ago, women in the village looked after their neighbors' babies for free and helped other women in cooking and household work. Today it is rare to find someone who has the time to help others. Community work done by women in the village has been commodified, converted into paid labor. Harvesting in the village was done through *kaiya*, a labor pooling system, but today it is mostly done using machinery and paid labor.

The commodification of women's labor has influenced the socio-spatial organization of the village in a broader sense. Women have developed a consciousness of the monetary value of their labor and a cultural knowledge of this value through travelling to other places. This knowledge and experience have helped them to develop self-esteem and confidence. These are supported by the ability to take over the breadwinner role and build a modern house with modern facilities.

Most women have developed a sense of independence including financial independence. Women's social empowerment and ability to recognize the importance of their role and men's inability to accept the changing gender roles have created new tensions and negotiations in regard to the patriarchal structure of the village. Women understand the value of their labor and try to use it for economic gain, like men. Although most of them are busy and unable to spend time helping others, they are organizing their labor and skills in social groups and developing new social networks to help each other when in need. How women are empowering themselves through social networking will be discussed later.

Women are not only transforming the domestic space and creating gendered public spheres for women, but are also entering the masculine public sphere, especially village organizations, *handiya* (Perera and Liyanage 2015) and *pola* (Liyanage, 2016). Pushpa was one of the first women to open a grocery store in the village. She invested the money she earned in the Middle East on a grocery shop at Weeragoda Handiya. She said, "I thought, if I could work in Lebanon, where it was totally new for me, why cannot I start my own business in this village?" Although most of the shops at the *handiya* were run by men before, now she is a part of it and has given villagers the idea that a woman can run a successful business. Most of the first female entrepreneurs in the village had once worked in the Middle East.

With a shop run by a woman, the *handiya* has become a much safer place for women who are more comfortable in sending their daughters. Kumari, a mother of two children said "I do not feel safe to send my daughter to some parts of the Mavi-Ela Handiya because it is mostly a place where men hang out". The three-wheel park and men's salon are two places that concern Kumari. "That is where all the bad things happen. I think young boys gather there to have drugs or for some bad things," she said. Kumari believes that the day when a woman starts driving a three-wheel taxi is not far away and she is hopeful that it will make Mavi-Ela Handiya safer.



Kumari agreed that Mavi-Ela Handiya is already transforming into a more inclusive place for women as three women are doing business there. Sumana is working in her family grocery store; Chanu has opened a beauty salon for women and Latha is running a small vegetable stall in a corner. Although it is only Latha who has worked in the Middle East, women's entrepreneurship in the village was influenced by female migrant workers. Working in the Middle East has not only given the financial capability to start a business in a central place like this, and enter a masculine space, but has also made women believe in their capabilities.

Kumari is not sending her daughter to certain areas of the village but, expects other women to make those areas safer. The gap between Kumari's fear and expectation of a system change is probably the next level of women's empowerment and the transformation of gender roles. Yet Pushpa, Chanu, Sumana and Latha are already changing the spaces of gender as well as gendered time of space. Although girls and women were not advised to spend time at the *handiya* or outdoor places after dark, the presence of these women at the *handiya* is making it a safer place for girls, even into the early hours of the night.

Although they do it in good faith, some activists are unable to see women's gains. Some urban middle class activists in Sri Lanka are fighting against female migration to the Middle East due to recent unfortunate incidents that women had to face in particular countries. Chandi said

I worked for one of my masters and also his son's family for 12 long years. I did not face any problems. The government should have a better mechanism to help when women are in trouble without taking away the opportunities we have to work for nice people, earn money and have a good life too.

Women's migration has become somewhat of a taboo in the village due to the social issues that arose in the absence of women in the domestic spaces. Earlier, only unmarried women were not encouraged to migrate because parents were afraid that it would be difficult to find her a good husband after she has been away from her family, especially in another country without the close supervision of family. This attempt to control women's sexuality and protect

their virginity by keeping them under the protection of the patriarchal system is still there in the village. Now, with the garment factories being available regionally, women are encouraged to work in garment factories instead of going abroad.

## **Female Labor in National Urban Production Centers**

Around the same time when migration to Middle Eastern countries began, women from rural areas also began to join the national labor force as factory workers in Free Trade Zones (FTZ). FTZs were first established in Sri Lanka in 1978 by the 1977 government, which liberalized the economy. The first one was near the Colombo airport at Katunayake. FTZ factories opened up employment opportunities for women from rural areas. Rural women who used to live and work in their familiar environments began to move to new urban areas and live on their own. In this section, I will discuss how the transformation of women in FTZs influence Nelibewa.

Most of those who joined FTZ factories were unmarried women who were not encouraged to go abroad by their families. According to Hewamanne (2016), working in a factory in a FTZ was considered a better option than going to the Middle East. In Nelibewa, married women preferred the Middle Eastern option over working in a factory in the FTZ. Some women who work in the Middle East believe that it is a better choice for them due to the relatively higher wages they could make abroad. Mallika, who worked at Katunayake FTZ before her marriage, said it is a place for girls and boys to have fun, fall in love but not a good place for married women with responsibilities. She added that workers live in extreme conditions in FTZ, so going abroad as domestic workers and living in masters' households is better and safer for married women. Although working in FTZ factories is considered a social taboo and unsafe due to "sexual predators", it came to be considered a better option for unmarried women than going to the Middle East.

These stereotypical ideologies about the safer option for women based on their marital status reveal many issues; it is the keepers of the patriarchal system who decide the best place for women. In addition, Phadke et al (2011) highlight that “society” tries to save women from social dangers by keeping them in sheltered places instead of making public spaces safe for women.

In Nelibewa, most villagers have the perception that unmarried women should live close to their families, which is considered the safest place for them. The nuclear family acts as the patriarchal institution that controls women’s decisions over their own sexuality, employment and space. Katunayake FTZ is the most popular among women in Nelibewa as it is the closest FTZ to the village (80 miles). It is still the largest FTZ in Sri Lanka.

Women’s employment in the FTZ (referred to the Katunayake FTZ, unless mentioned) soon began to impact the village. Most of the women who worked in the FTZ got married to men from villages and towns unfamiliar to the villagers. Having acquired a broader understanding and perspective of both life and the world outside the village, these women brought back new knowledge, values, and attitudes; thus, challenging the local worldview and the assumed cultural “authenticity” of the village. The culture in the village was not only idealized as authentic, but villagers were expected to maintain the “authenticity”. The village culture was always in transition and women have been playing a major role in the transition. This transformation jumped in leaps when women began to acquire new knowledge and independence by working in distant urban areas.

As Hewamanne (2016) argues, looking out from the FTZ, a tension or an anxiety occurred as women obtained freedom to earn and achieve their desires including sexual desires. None of the villagers from Nelibewa could recall an instance when a FTZ worker from the village got an unwanted pregnancy, committed suicide or experienced a miserable situation. Yet, some unidentified villagers generated rumors based on unfortunate incidents that happened in other villages. This does not mean that there were no incidents of sexual assault or

other social issues in the FTZ but, in Nelibewa, the idea that women in FTZs are bad was constructed on an incident or two from other villages. This is not limited to Nelibewa. Although they may have earned a good dowry, a “respectable” family would not accept a FTZ worker as a good daughter-in-law. Working in FTZ thus became the last option that women in villages would consider.

Bandara Menike said that extramarital affairs, unwanted pregnancies and abortions existed in the village long before women started to migrate to urban areas. Yet, the media and other patriarchal national bodies generated anxiety through distortion, depicting rural women as pure Buddhists and the repositories of Sinhala-Buddhist cultural values. The creation of this tension by the media and middle class patriots was built upon the tension caused in the patriarchal system due to changing roles and spaces of women

The solution projected from within the patriarchal structure was to “protect” women by not sending them away from homes, thus reproducing the sexual control of young females. The extant patriarchal system works better when women stay at home taking care of the reproduction tasks, while men work in the production in the public sphere. Nonetheless, the migration of women from rural areas to urban places of production not only transformed the spaces of production but also the spaces of reproduction, domestic spaces, the women, and the village as a whole.

## **Transformation of Women in the FTZ**

The main agents of exposure of the village to external, particularly urban, culture were young females who migrated miles away from home to urban areas to work in factories. The large-scale exposure of women to the outside world provided a new social awareness among them, especially the young unmarried-women who were excited to experience new trends coming their way. Phadke et. al. (2011) writes that women are more comfortable and free in

unfamiliar environments because moral policing is not as strong as in familiar environments. When women are in environments unfamiliar to the family and the villagers, it is hard for the members of these institutions to police women's sexuality, socialization and labor, in the name of safety, without someone to watch over. The behavior of the girls who came to urban areas and found their freedom created tensions with middle-class patriarchal and patriotic values in the village.

Hewamanne (2016) illustrates how women transformed themselves in the FTZ as they lived away from their parents, families and native villages where they were "protected" under patriarchal wings. They were both adapting themselves to and developing the culture in their female only boarding houses around the FTZ. She (Hewamanne, 2016, 4) argues that "women acquired new knowledge that was previously considered taboo [and this caused] their cognitive, emotional and moral dispositions to change".

This transformation in women was not only emotional but was also physically visible. Hewamanne (2008) writes, FTZ workers who were considered "unhygienic, backward, ignorant, and tasteless rural women [adapted] "appropriate" attire, fashions and behavior patterns with the intense socialization process in FTZ". Mallika, a 7-year employee of the FTZ who married a man in Nelibewa, shared her experience of women changing the vocabulary and the pronunciation of words after being in the FTZ for a short period of time. She said that girls from southern Sri Lanka used "*makkatei*" to ask "for what", but they later changed it to "*mokatada*", a common word used in most parts of the country including Katunayaka area. According to Mallika, some women even began to see their villagers, including their family members, as backward and not possessing any understanding about the "modern world".

Hewamanne (2016) observes two periods of transformation: The first is the movement of these girls from villages to the city and the second stage is them returning to the village. This corresponds to shifting images of FTZ women, ranging from obedient and virginal village daughters to promiscuous, fun loving global workers, to acceptable daughters-in-law. These two

stages of women are very abstract; in reality, these stages are not clearly distinguishable. Every woman who goes through this process, has her own journey.

Hewamanne (2016) well elaborates how women transform themselves with the spatial shift from village to urban factories, how the images of ideal Sinhalese-Buddhist rural daughters transform to factory workers in these urban production centers, and how women use their agency more with the newly found freedom in the new public spheres of urban areas to gain more independence and shape their lives. In Nelibewa, among others, Mallika changed her hairstyle when she was working in Katunayaka. It was because her new co-workers pointed to her hairstyle as *gode* (rural in a derogatory way) and old fashioned, perhaps also referring to rural. She eventually changed her attire as well. When she returned to the village for the first time, her brother was mad at her for changing her hairstyle. She also felt different, somewhat odd, among the villagers. Later she felt proud of the changes she made to her attire and the adoption of fashions, including gold jewelry.

### **Changing the Socio-spatial Structures in the Village**

The fact that women's working experience changed the spaces of production is well addressed in Hewamanne (2008;2016). Beyond that, they also changed the spaces in their native villages. This is the focus of this thesis.

Mallika and other women became the ones to bring new fashion and trends to the village, thus transforming the village. Her parents did not expect her to support their family (including the parents and siblings), so she collected a dowry with her savings and married a man in Nelibewa. "I felt people in this village are even more *gode* than myself before going to Katunayake" Mallika said, displaying the same stereotypes the other women in Katunayake had for her. When she returned to Nelibewa, she said that she was not the backward, timid and shy

girl who went to work in the FTZ. Changing hair and clothes are simply the manifestation of bigger struggles and changes.

The change that women went through was much deeper and ideological. Protests from society came mostly against the transformation of the body; outside changes that were visible to outsiders. Yet the story of these women and their change was more complex for the villagers to readily recognize. The girls who went to FTZ factories grew up to be more confident and strategic women. “Innocent girls survive in [the different] FTZ; we have to know the tricks and get only what we need while enjoying the freedom there,” Mallika added. She said that her life changed a lot with her experience at the FTZ and this influenced her life in her husband’s village.

Hewamanne (2016, 5) highlights the second stage of the women’s transformation. After return, “Many of these women often become isolated in villages still steeped in patriarchal ideals once they leave the FTZ and, with time, economic, social and cultural empowerment garnered within the FTZ appear to wither away”. My observations and research do not confirm a withering away of the empowerment upon their return to rural areas. Besides, most women do not return to their home-villages; they leave for the new husband’s village, maybe after a short stay in her village.

Most female workers leave the FTZ after marriage and return to rural areas, mostly to become a daughters-in-law in another village or, rarely, in their native villages. When “fun-loving free trade workers” get married to a man in another village, she has to familiarize with the husband’s village. Most of the former female workers in FTZ who got married to a man in Nelibewa are financially, socially and emotionally in a better position, and the way they negotiate with the husband’s family and village is different, more empowered, than other women.

When a woman has experienced an independent phase of her life without directly getting transferred from her parents to her new husband and his family, women carry more

awareness about themselves and gender relationships. It is clearly different from the parents handing over a girl to the husband and his family, most of the time, with a dowry earned by the parents. These women have already crossed boundaries of gender control, becoming what Sonita Sarker and Esha De (2002) call “trans-status subjects”. They are more confident in negotiating the socio-spatial organization in her husband’s respective villages.

As Mallika highlighted, she went to her husband’s family and village after living away from her native village. During her time in Katunayake Free Trade Zone, she became more independent socially and financially. Due to her reflections on village life, urban life, the value of her labor and her own transformation, she was much more aware of the marriage. Mallika said “we also met some women who went through difficult marriages, perhaps divorces and faced some relationship issues. We were free to talk about marriage and relationships in our boarding places unlike in our villages”

According to Mallika, this awareness empowered the girls to face the marriage, the husband’s family and the old and new villages with more confidence. They are able to demand for their rights in the husband’s house and consider familiarization of the new spaces of their husband’s village as a challenge to engage, instead of simply letting the village absorb them. Rather than becoming a part of the husband’s extended family, these women expect to build their own family.

Bringing a dowry, especially being able to finance one’s own dowry, has given great self-confidence to these women. The women who had the opportunity to work and finance their own dowries are not simply transferred from being daughters to wives and daughters-in-law. More than the kinship position, they have developed a confident psychological position. This jump has empowered them and made them independent.

According to Bandara Menike, prior to the 1970s, most of the girls who could not go for higher education, after completing school education or dropping out of school, had one option before them: getting married. Parents had to find a dowry so they could “give out” their daughter



to a “good family”. Marriage was basically the biggest milestone of a women’s life during the mid-twentieth century according to Bandara Menike and some other villagers. It is also a huge milestone of the parents’ lives.

The marriage trend in Nelibewa after the 1950s was that the parents gave a portion of their movable possessions to their daughters as dowry and sent them away to their husband’s villages. Gunadasa said that there was a saying during that time as *deega giya genita gama ne* (no property in the village belongs to the woman who is married out).

With the changes in the economic conditions, it became harder for parents to find dowries for their daughters. If parents could not afford a dowry, the girl had to wait for someone to fall in love and marry her without a dowry. Staying unmarried was considered a taboo and is called *akalata naki wenawa* (growing old in vain). Employment opportunities created in the FTZ offered an alternative means for women to earn their own dowries. At the same time, the average age of marriage for village women from 16-20 to 22-24. This is most likely due to girls working for at least 5 years in factories to save sufficient funds for the dowry.

Having their own dowry became a means for women to increase their power in the domestic sphere. As discussed in the previous chapter, although asking for a dowry became a shame for men and their families, providing a dowry gave women more power and the ability to negotiate the socio-spatial structures in their husbands’ families and villages. Although it can be considered a way of taking the oppressive system forward by the oppressed, it is also a weapon of the weak (Scott, 1985) used by women to balance the power within the oppressive system.

Hasanthi joined a garment factory when she was 16 years old, earned enough money for a decent dowry and got married in 2013, when she was 22. She resigned from the factory before her marriage and now she and her husband share a house with her husband’s parents and sister. According to her, she does not feel that she is living in someone else’s house because most of the furniture and household equipment in the house were brought by her. She said “everyone in this village knows that I brought a good dowry”. According to Hasanthi,

bringing a dowry earned by herself represents her as a responsible woman and a person with a say in her husband's village.

Social stigma that prevailed in the village about female factory workers as *gaament keli* (garment girl) has changed to "courageous girls" to a great extent. Pavithra who, moved out of the village with her parents to a neighboring village where she currently lives, began working in a garment factory during the few months break she had after she got admissions to university. The inhabitants of Nelibewa said that she is a very courageous and strong girl because she decided to work in a factory to finance part of her university education. She is an exception; most of the girls who work in the factories are the ones who could not get into a university and cannot afford higher education in the forms of external degrees or vocational training.

After school, it is very rare that a girl stays at home because she can make some income by joining a garment factory. Turning the old gender roles around, most of the boys in the village stay at home for at least a few years after school, without going to work. This provides more time for boys to loiter around the village and use public spaces. Although the girls get financially independent by going to work, Hasanthi expressed that most of the girls, including her, go to work to prepare themselves for the patriarchal marriage. Women are seeking the empowerment within existing structure.

## **Conjuncture of Capitalism and Patriarchy**

Ann Markusen (2005, 173) discusses how the conjuncture of capitalism and patriarchy creates a spatial form in advanced industrial countries which employs women's labor power mostly in the domestic sphere. According to Hayden (2005), the creation of two separate spheres as production and reproduction space in urban and suburban areas, as well as limiting women's socialization to the domestic sphere have created gendered spaces in American cities. Spain (1992) writes that Marxist feminists argue that capitalism and patriarchy together oppress

women, exploiting both sex and labor. These studies highlight how women are the victims of the capitalism and patriarchy. This study, takes the reverse view. Following the feminizing spaces argument which Perera (2015) makes as part of his larger *People's Spaces* argument, this study highlights how rural women in Nelibewa use their agency to create social and physical space for their new gender roles.

The confluence of capitalism and patriarchy caused a different trajectory in Nelibewa: the women used the opportunities capitalism opened up to change their position within the patriarchy. When a higher demand for female labor was created by international capitalism in Nelibewa, a village in a country that is in the periphery of the capitalist world-system (Wallerstein, 1974), the patriarchal system faced many drawbacks. Capitalism drew women out of the “reproduction sphere” and the domestic space, creating a tension in hegemonic systems. The patriarchal system was forced to adapt; some husbands of migrant workers adopted some domestic roles and women began providing their own dowries and organizing their networks to support their roles as breadwinners and FTZ workers. This somewhat transformed the system.

Capitalism is also transforming its production spaces in response to contemporary changes, creating both openings and constraints. Multinational corporations began opening garment factories in low-income countries; although they exploit labor, they provide higher wages within the country, compared to other local factories. Although the wages were lower than FTZ factories, closer location, meals and transport facilities attracted more female labor to these regional factories. The decentralization of factory locations brought them closer to the female labor pool. This is one main step taken by capitalist industries that has challenged the extant patriarchy in villages. Hence, patriarchy and capitalism are not congruent; they are, in fact, conflicting in this case.

The trend of women working in garment factories still continues, but a larger number of women in the village work in regional factories due to their closer location. While they first left for employment at Katunayake FTZ, lately more women work in factories that are closer to the

village. This dropped the number of women working in Katunayake. While more women still work in the Middle East, only two women in the village were working at the Katunayaka FTZ during the time of research.

The distinction between married and unmarried women in regard to employment is now gone, as both now work in near by factories. The minimum age to work in most of the popular factories is 18 years, but these factories increasingly look for experience and education. Some girls work in local factories for lower wages and then join large factories.

The issue of safety for the working girls is mostly addressed through factory transportation services provided between the neighborhood and the factory. Although the basic salary is considerably low, incentive schemes and overtime pay attract more female workers. Better and safer transportation services not only attract more female labor for factories, but also partly resolves the safety issue for women, making dents in the patriarchy.

## **Balancing the Production and Reproduction Spaces**

With new factories coming to towns closer to the village, women began commuting to work from home. Slimline in Pannala and Slimtex in Kuliyaipitiya are the two most popular garment factories among women in Nelibewa. Owned by the same company, both factories provide transportation for both work shifts. Women have to leave the village very early because the first shift begins at 5:00am and ends at 2:00pm. The other shift begins at 2:00pm and runs until 10:00 pm; so women reach the village close to midnight. The times of women's departure and arrival and the provision of transportation make them comfortable in going to and returning from work at these times have changed the time of spaces by women in the village. Women now walk around the village until midnight as they arrive at the village around 11 pm and midnight from the Garment Factories.

As discussed above, women in the village organization requested streetlights for the Weeragoda *handiya* because women wait for transportation at this place. In Weeragoda Handiya, the bus stop was dilapidated and it was risky for people to wait, especially when it was dark. Women in Weeragoda *bath samithiya* (lit. “rice society”) collected donations from the villagers. They pointed to the fact that the bus stop is unsafe, especially for women who wait at the bus stop in the dark to catch factory transportation, and also for kids waiting to catch school buses before the day breaks. The bath samithiya renovated the bus stop with the financial and labor support of the villagers. Phadke et. al. (2011) write that society is only trying to protect women by restricting them to safe places without making our cities and spaces safe. However, in the village, with the acquisition of new roles as suppliers for the families and becoming socially empowered, women have taken the lead in making safe and inclusionary spaces for women and children in Nelibewa.

With the opening up of new factories in regional centers such as Kuliypitiya, Pannala and Katupotha, most of the women in the village are now becoming employed, causing greater changes in the socio-spatial organization. The village also saw new institutions such as daycare centers. Preschools were not popular in Nelibewa before the 1980s, although preschools or the montessoris, as they are commonly called in Sri Lanka, began to come up ever since the training conducted in 1944 by Maria Montessori. An estimated eighty percent of children between the ages of two and five years old attend some form of preschool or day care, amounting to over 500,000 children in Sri Lanka now (*Sunday Observer*, 2015). Following the trend set by Montessori, a preschool was opened in Nelibewa in 1982; it was associated with the Buddhist temple and village organizations. Still there were no daycare centers until the early-2000s. Today, there are two daycare centers in the village and the mothers who are employed send their kids to kids to them, starting at two to three years of age. Earlier, the preschool age was four years.

There are also paid babysitters in the village. However, mothers are still responsible to pay for daycare and babysitters in many cases. Although women became employed and their roles changed, family and society expect them to perform certain duties and responsibilities defined as the women's role. Women have to trade off some of their new gains or additional efforts to maintain the freedom that comes with employment. This highlights the continuity of patriarchy in a different form.

With the buying of electric equipment, domestic work that women used to do is mechanizing, beginning from the kitchen. The cause and effect is not clear; i.e., whether women first joined the labor force and their new income enabled them to buy equipment and they began using electric and modern equipment because they got busy with their employment or whether they found time to joined the paid labor force due to the reduction of the domestic workload by mechanizing and commodifying the domestic works. The story is the same with the purchasing of processed spices and food. Earlier, the spices, especially *thunapaha* (curry powder), were homemade using traditional equipment; rice was processed at home and all three meals were cooked at home. Now, most of the spices used for cooking are available at retail stores and people buy them. Some prefer fresh spices, so they buy the ingredients and use a grinding mill in the village. Some use grinders or other electric equipment at home. Rice mills and other grinding mills came to the village as women were getting busy; conversely, the mills created free time for women to join or continue to be in the labor force.

Almost every household made its meals at home at least until recently. Buying meals was unheard of in the village, until at least 2005. Now, some women who do not go to work have opened small businesses of cooked food for sale. As this is the beginning, the businesses are still located in their houses. Employed women and other villagers buy food from these places. While many women went abroad to transform household chores into employment, now the "other" women, who are at home, also transforming cooking and daycare (babysitting) into a business. In this, much of women's labor is commodifying.

At the same time, some commodities are also produced in the village by women. In addition to childcare and food production discussed above, snacks for special events and festivals are also prepared by women. This makes the new role of women both inside and outside the domestic sphere easier, and opens up business opportunities within the village itself.

When a woman opens a business to provide meals and snacks for families in which the mother is employed, that changes the role of that woman to an entrepreneur. Sama has a small food business. She changed her dwelling into a small business (and residential) premise, turning her front porch into a shop. She sells a few retail items such as soap, candy, Panadol, and paracetamol. Some women supply home-cooked food to the stores in the village. In this way, women are changing the village, its social structure, morals, and the space. Here the women in Nelibewa act more like those in Southeast Asia who are more entrepreneurial than traditional Sri Lankan women, who seem more like victims of the system. As evident, women are not simply the passive victims that the mainstream discourses suggest; they are agents of change.

Chandani, who worked in Lebanon as a domestic worker and opened a grocery store in the village, claims that women who went out of the village and became entrepreneurs upon return have become role models for other women in the village to become entrepreneurs. The impact of female villagers who went out of the village manifests in different forms. They not only set the model, but also created a need among other women to join the market economy by changing values and the community lifestyle in the village. At the same time, until the new millennium, women used to get together and prepare snacks and meals for special events at homes. The women who migrated and became employed cannot participate in communal cooking. This created the need for the commodification of the certain goods and services in the village.

Curiously, these changes have not affected men's traditional roles very much; they have not attempted to balance the changing domestic workload in any substantive way. There are situations in which men participate in domestic work, share household obligations and manage the money that the wife sends from the Middle East. Amara who works in a garment factory bought a three-wheeler for her family. Her husband Kumara operates this common form of taxi in Sri Lanka, making it another source of income for the family. This is one of the two three-wheel taxis available in Ambawatta, a neighborhood in the village. It is now convenient for the people in the village to take a taxi. As women look for safety –in addition to other requirements-- hiring a known person, a taxi driver, fulfills this requirement. Kumara now hires the three-wheeler to go to the *handiya* (not too far) and other places outside of the village.

With the availability of three-wheel taxis in the village, transportation has become easier for women. With the help of others in the village, Kumara also repaired the road that connects the neighborhood to the other parts of the village and neighboring villages along the paddy fields a few times. As the road is along paddy fields, it gets inundated and damaged during the rainy season. After repairing the road by themselves and seeing it gets damaged again, the villagers got a local politician to allocate funds to concrete this stretch of road. Now, with a better-quality road, the village has better access and Kumara's three-wheel, sponsored by his wife, provides vehicular transportation for villagers.

Regardless of whether it is called development or modernization, the village is transforming with indirect influence from outside including the government, planners and other non-governmental organizations in the village. People transform existing spaces in order to address changing and emerging needs and wants. The changing roles of women seem the prime force behind this change; it is transforming gender roles, social norms and social spaces in the village.

Hayden writes that “the problem is paradoxical: women cannot improve their status in the home unless their overall economic position in the society is altered; women cannot improve



their status in the paid labor force unless their domestic responsibilities are altered” (2005, 51).

This victimizes women, by overlooking the agency of women. As a solution, Hayden

recommends the following:

a program to achieve economic and environmental justice for women requires, by definition, a solution which overcomes the traditional divisions between the household and the market economy, the private dwelling and the workplace. One must transform the economic situation of the traditional homemaker whose skilled labor has been unpaid, but economically and socially necessary to society; one must also transform the domestic situation of the employed woman (Hayden, 2005).

Here, both the problem and the solution are hinged on economics.

As I see it, and have been illustrating, village life is far greater than economic in bringing about the above solutions; economics is only one of many aspects of village life. The outside-in (economic) perspective victimizes women. Instead, I have adopted an inside-out view from the vantage point of women (Perera 2002; 2016). From this perspective, women are agents of change; they make changes, although within particular constraints, and largely without destroying the patriarchy. Although, there are no official or planning attempts to create gender equality or equity in the village, select individuals in the village use their agency to support new changes in women’s role and the overall changes the village is undergoing. Regardless, women are changing their “traditional roles”: They work outside the village, get involved in paid labor, commodify much of the women’s chores, run businesses such as daycare centers and stores, make public spaces such as bus stops more women- and child-safe and friendly. Through this, the women have transformed the village. The new food outlets, grinding mills, and daycare centers both continue to fulfil the needs caused by this change and enable women to empower themselves. The village is becoming space that is more inclusive for women and it is women who cause this change.

## **Civil War: Absence of Men and Changes in Gender Roles**

Another major change in the village was caused by the civil war (1983-2009) in Sri Lanka. As women went out for employment, the war also dramatically changed the gender of spaces in the village. This section focuses on the impact of the war on gendered spaces in Nelibewa, approximately 300 km away from the war zone.

Civil war in Sri Lanka created a huge demand for young men to join the armed forces. When young men, both married and unmarried, joined the military, it created a considerable absence of young men in the village. The absence of men did not impact women's level of employment, but added more responsibilities on them in both domestic and public spheres. However, with husbands and fathers away from homes, some newly-married women and young mothers who lived in their husband's village went back to their parents for few months at a time. Therefore, their familiarization process in the husband's village was met with more challenges and was different than when their husbands accompanied them to Nelibewa. Some women looked after kids, elderly parents-in-law and took on all responsibilities at the husband's home.

More than ninety percent of the men who joined armed forces from Nelibewa were unemployed or were surplus labor in farming. Hence, it did not create a scarcity of labor, rather supplied some employment opportunities for unemployed men and reduced unemployment.

*Development Progress Report* of the European Center for Development Policy Management (2015) highlights that employment progress is not necessarily 'success' – outward migration and war-related employment have also been key factors" for low unemployment rates. Nonetheless, joining the military changed the definition of masculinity in the village. Men who used to be unemployed were considered national heroes and the soldiers received enormous respect from the villagers. Young girls considered getting married to a soldier who fights for the motherland

as the best service they could do for the country as women. Kumari said girls knew that soldiers' lives were at risk and they considered it an honor to be married to one. She also added that soldiers earned a considerable amount of income and most of them built houses and bought motor bicycles.

These military men became more masculine in the eyes of rural women. Their better incomes made them more attractive among women. The patriarchal system in the village became stronger and women were expected to treat their military husbands like gods when they come home. Although this situation created more stress on women, they also found freedom and a new level of agency to act in the absence of their husbands or using the fame of their husbands.

Rajitha, attached to the Sri Lankan Air Force, said that his wife takes care of almost all household work and public activities in the village. Both Rajitha and his wife Malee are from Nelibewa. Rajitha thinks that it is easy for Malee to manage the household and public roles in the village, that are defined as the roles of both men and women because she is also from the same village. She actively participates in all village organizations and gets involved in women's organizations in the neighborhood.

She lived with her parents after their marriage because her husband was away and his family, an extended family, did not make her feel welcome. They built a separate house and moved within the second year of their marriage. Malee took most of the responsibilities in dealing with masons, carpenters and other related parties in building their house. Her active involvement was influenced by the fact that she is also from the same village. Women had to take responsibilities that were considered "masculine" before, due to the absence of men in the household. Women also gained a newly defined respect when their husbands were in the military. Even in general, women get more access to public spaces when they are married, but more so when the husband is in the military.

Phadke (2011) stresses that women use marriage to get more access and freedom. She argues that in public in India, even unmarried women use accessories that married women wear so they can use the stereotype of the society to gain more access to public spaces and more freedom to use public spaces. When a woman is married to a military person, she receives enormous respect in the village. Women like Malee use this respect to gain the freedom to participate fully in social activities, as well as access to public spaces in the village.

Kumudu is married to Amila, a soldier in the Special Task Force, but she is from another village. She struggled to adapt to Nelibewa because her husband was away from the village beginning immediately after their marriage. She said “my parents-in-law are nice, but everything was new to me. When I explained the situation, my husband agreed to let me stay with my family when he was away on duty”.

Amila was not very happy that he had to let his wife spend more time at her village because it was against the tradition. Amila had begun constructing a house when he got married; in his absence, his father dealt with people related to house construction. After becoming a mother Kumudu became more comfortable at her husband’s village. She now lives in their new house built on the same land as Amila’s parent’s house. Their son is 3 years old during my fieldwork and Kumudu is getting highly connected to the village and getting involved in village activities. When men are away from the village, most of the women native to the village adapt to the situation more easily and quickly than the women who migrated to the village after marriage. Hence, nativity is a very important factor in women’s negotiation of spaces in Nelibewa.

Rajitha bought a motor bicycle a few years ago, and he is about to buy a three-wheeler, but he does not have the driver’s license yet. “My wife is the one who rides the bike mostly because I’m coming home only for short vacations in one or two months,” he said. Malee has a license to drive motor bicycles but not three wheelers because Rajitha did not agree for her to get licensed for three-wheelers and light vehicles at the time she got her motor bicycle license a

few years ago, stating that women don't drive three wheelers and light vehicles. Now as this norm has changed and she is required to take her two kids to school, she is planning to get a driver's license for three wheelers and light vehicles.

Malee said: "Maybe I should get a driver's license for heavy vehicles too, things are changing and we women cannot be backward because we have a lot of new responsibilities". She referred to Sepalika, a woman who moved to a nearby village from Nelibewa and drives a truck interchangeably with her husband for their business. Sepalika was one of the first women who used to ride a "masculine-type" motor bicycle, one with an engine power greater than 135cc and two mufflers. She did this because she commuted between her native village and her husband's village frequently when her husband was in the Northern Province war zone as a soldier in the Army. Malee said, "I remember Sepalika when we were kids, she was almost like a heroine for us".

Long-term absences of husbands in the village challenged traditional gender roles and changed gender relationships in the domestic sphere too. Although men received more respect at homes as they served the country and supplied enough to keep the families comfortable, women also earned more freedom. As they were taking care of the household and public responsibilities, they also gained more recognition in both domestic and public spheres in the village.

Creating cracks in the patriarchal system, nibbling into it, and redefining existing gender roles and relationships have taken place for a long time. The absence of men due to the civil war also transformed and redefined some of the gender roles and responsibilities in new ways. During this time, women began to ride bicycles, work with contractors to build their houses, take kids to school, prepare land for paddy cultivation, use markets and the *handiya*, and participate in community organizations and activities. When women began to do the works that were labeled men's work and men received higher respect for their military service, gender roles got rapidly redefined in Nelibewa. This also stratified the masculinity as the young men who joined

the war as soldiers, who were considered more masculine. Women used their agency to create more room for their role and found that they could take part in the activities that were labeled as men's responsibilities or masculine activities. New definitions of masculinity and femininity made the social and spatial structure of the village more inclusive and less-discriminatory for genders. Women creating more pertinent spaces for themselves and becoming actively involved in social activities in the village did not significantly harm or reduce the free will of men in regard to shaping society and space.

The civil war in Sri Lanka stretched over three decades and some families had fathers only visiting them for few weeks a year, for several years. Some young married men died in the war causing single mothers in the village. At the death of a soldier, the wife receives a death gratuity and his pension. If the widow of a deceased soldier remarries, their children are entitled to equal shares of the pension (*Widows' and Orphans' Pension Fund Ordinance* (armed forces), 1970).

Culturally though, the community expects the wife to stay unmarried and loyal to her deceased husband for the rest of her life. Underlying this, the wife is expected to be loyal to the country and countrymen, practically those around her. Namali who married for the second time after her first husband died in war said "I was only married to my first husband for one year and we did not have kids, but some people referred to me as an unfaithful woman because I got married to my second husband, although it was five years after my first husband died". Namali highlighted the social pressure that many widows of war are subjected to. Many widows still stay as single parents, largely in their husband's village. Neela is one of the women who decided not to go back to her parent's village and stay with her two kids in the house in Nelibewa which was half constructed by her husband in his village. She used the death gratuity received to complete the construction of the house and donated some money she got as compensation following her husband's death to construct a shelter at a bus stop. She receives a monthly allowance from the government for the deceased husband and she invested some savings from the compensation

in a savory snacks business. She carries on her small business at Mavi-Ela Pola and some other nearby village markets to earn extra income to give her children a better education.

Most families donated some of the compensation money they received for their beloved family member who died in the war for village development, in their name. Some roads in the village and a shelter at a bus stop are constructed with these funds and these are named after those deceased soldiers. Although it was not common to have memorials and tomb stones in the village, there are a few memorials in the village for war heroes and cemeteries receive more importance than before due to soldiers' tombstones.

When men joined the military, it created a temporary single-parent situation, but the death of those soldiers made it permanent for those families. There are 18 women-headed families belonging to Nelibewa Village Organization, the membership of which is 123 families. Three of the 18 women-headed families are headed by war widows. These three women decided to stay in their husbands' village after his death.



*Figure 20: Memorial of a soldier who died in the war*

The absence of men transformed the women's roles in many ways. Other than the direct physical changes that happened with the death of soldiers, women are also changing the spatial structure out of the necessity to take care of so-called men's responsibilities. Some women

have begun businesses and some have found jobs. Women take their children to school, shop for their family, participate in village organizations and community events like *shramadhana* (self-help events) and deal with contractors in building houses. Women engage in public spaces more than before their husbands joined the military. When more women do businesses at the *pola* and *handiya* and use these spaces frequently, public spaces eventually become safer and more inclusive for women.

In the USA, women were drawn to the labor force in the absence of young men in the towns due to World War II. Hayden (2005) highlights how women had to take more responsibilities with their men joining the military in the USA. Urban plans and designs incorporated facilities and land uses that support women's involvement in production spheres, therefore the urban environments became more gender inclusive (Hayden, 2005). In contrast, women in Nelibewa were not drawn to the labor force in large numbers, although some women joined the paid labor force.

Most of the changes in gender roles occurred in Nelibewa not because women had to join labor force, but because women had to take more responsibilities and they made use of the privilege brought by their husbands' national role. The necessity of women's involvement in public spaces and social activities, which were labeled as masculine spaces and activities was created due to the absence of men in the village. Villagers were compelled to change stereotypes and gender notions about the ideal womanhood and women's roles to continue the daily activities in the village while their husbands were "fighting for the country". These modified daily activities transformed spaces, giving greater access for women to public spaces. The creation of an inclusive socio-spatial organization for women in the village was a very grounded process which was not directly imposed on the village by external forces.



## Conclusion

Villages are seen by the mainstream society as authentic units with comparatively static cultural identity. Rural women are also seen as the representations of authentic Sinhala-Buddhist culture as represented in mainstream literature and media. Nelibewa is a village with less interactions with the outside world, but it is not an authentic unit. It has been transforming and the process has been influenced by external socio-cultural changes. Nelibewa is a translocality (Appadurai, 1995), but transformed from within in response to these influences (Perera 2016).

In regard to a Daanchi in Nepal, Kc and Perera (2016) demonstrate how the village is modernized by its inhabitants responding to external influences; it is produced locally in ways appropriate and affordable for the locality. The villagers perceive and negotiate the “modern” based on their own (but changing) socio-cultural values and worldviews. Socio-cultural hegemony in the village is shaped by the religion, economy, patriarchy and many other factors. In turn, the transition of socio-cultural hegemony influences the transformation of the factors that shape the hegemony.

Women are strong agents of change who thoroughly evaluated the external influences and internal circumstances and constructed socio-cultural changes that could make the best out of the conditions. In so doing, they appropriated and negotiated external influences to cater to the local needs and identities which also change in the same process. They also used this opportunity to resist select local values and challenge them based on the external knowledge and inspiration, transforming space and knowledge. All the different situations discussed above: education, migration to the Middle East, work in urban factories and husbands joining the military have given women new platforms to enhance their freedom and agency. Although women were always considered agents of protecting and transmitting culture, they have used new global, national and regional socio-cultural trends to open up more room to exercise their

agency and transform the households and the village, particularly in regard to both social and spatial structures. As women adapt themselves to new responsibilities and change their roles, men have not been able to adapt to the new situations and new roles bestowed upon them. They have largely fallen victim to the external processes.

Tension in the patriarchal system created by the new definition of gender roles in the village is both negative and positive, and depends on the observer. Spatial and social transformation is not always singular in direction, but takes multiple paths at different speeds, with many ups and downs. Some villagers are very much concerned about the changes. Gunadasa was not happy about any change that is happening in the village, particularly ones that shake the assumed stability of the village. Mahesh viewed the current transformations as more negative than positive and women as agents of negative transformation. Most of the villagers do not try to label the changes as positive or negative, but accept changes as they come, thus going with the flow. Most women seem to have accepted the transformation, understanding their contribution to and role in the transformation. In short, for over five decades, women have been using their agency to change themselves as well as the socio-spatial organization in the village. The change caused by women in the village is far greater than what men have caused.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

My research confirmed that people in Nelibewa are less privileged than the average urban middle-class people in Sri Lanka. When it comes to women, rural women are even less privileged. Nevertheless, women in Nelibewa have a story to share that the mainstream society has not been able to hear clearly. Perhaps they could learn from it also. Their story is about their own empowerment, caused by the feminization of social and spatial structures (Perera 2002). This empowerment is not a result of huge protests against the existing structures, nor is it caused by a breaking of the rules; rather, it is a product of women using the “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985) at every possible opportunity. The daily negotiations women make are not legible to most researchers and feminists because what these women cause are very small changes in their eyes. Some feminists based in Colombo degrade the changes that women make in the village as “survival tactics” and coping mechanisms that never lead to changes in the patriarchal system that oppresses women in the village.

This research reveals that women in Nelibewa have expanded their agency within extant social and spatial structures, substantially feminizing them. The thesis highlights these small changes which are developed from within and hence proved to be long-term and sustainable. Being a person of the same background and a subject of the study, and having received a theoretical understanding in planning, gender, anthropology and feminist theory, and with experience in different cultures, first, I was able to observe these smaller changes. I was able to develop a position both inside and outside of these subject positions to read the daily negotiations of women in Nelibewa and listen to a lot of their voices. Women in Nelibewa are changing themselves, and in the process transforming domestic space, gender stereotypes and the spatial organization of the village. It is a massive transformation.

## **Women's agency in spaces**

As a rural village, Nelibewa was not influenced much by government planning and development efforts. The spaces in the village were largely produced by its inhabitants. Most of the time, laws and policies come into play after the villagers have shaped the spaces. Although the socio-spatial structures have historically followed patriarchal values, and were strongly influenced by Victorian values introduced by the colonizers, after independence, especially from the 1980s, women have used their agency to create new spaces and transform what was existing for their purposes. Although they have referred to patriarchy, as the thesis findings substantiate, they have transformed the village to a degree that some old patriarchal spaces are a thing of the past.

## **Gender and Women's Empowerment are Locally Produced**

As the findings in the thesis reveal, women in Nelibewa have their own ways of dealing with the issues they face, creating advantages out of the existing socio-cultural conditions. The progress of women's rights in different localities cannot be measured by using the same concepts and theories that were developed in other places of the world. In short, they are specific to the place and time and there is no universal measurement for women's rights, except for some very basic ones, but their manifestation could also be different in different places due to social and cultural differences. Western feminism has evolved in a specific socio-cultural background. The definitions of gender and women's rights that Western scholars discuss are different from the gender definitions and roles in Nelibewa and the larger Sri Lanka. Western feminist scholars also discuss the "Third World," "Third World women" and their rights. As Mohanty (1984) argues, there is no one "Third World woman", but every country and every local

area have their own gender definitions and gender norms; different individuals in these localities have different ways of negotiating women's rights and spaces.

Historic, socio-cultural systems and values in Nelibewa that were influenced by religion, and transformed through local practices, produced gender definitions in the village and were later transformed by colonialism and capitalism. On the one hand, these changes in socio-cultural system in Nelibewa have transformed its gender definitions, norms and roles. On the other hand, changes in the womanhood and its definitions also continue to transform the socio-spatial organization of Nelibewa.

### **The Colonial and Capitalist Influences on Gender Norms**

The Sri Lankan socio-cultural system did not evolve to a capitalist system from within, as in Europe (Wallerstein, 1974), but was incorporated into the capitalist world-economy through the introduction of the plantation economy (Perera 1998). Perera (1998) further highlights that the colonial social and administrative system did not displace (smaller) local social systems, but was superimposed on these. According to Perera (2001), the introduction of colonial Victorian gender norms in colonial Ceylon was also geographically uneven. Areas with plantation economies and colonial centers were highly influenced by colonial value systems, whereas the influence on other areas was slow. The introduced values were also contested and reshaped by the nationalists (Obeyesekere, 1972;1975). It took much longer for these gender norms to reach rural areas like Nelibewa and the new values did not totally replace the extant values; rather, people negotiated and assimilated some of these values into the existing system, as Newton Gunasinghe (1996) argues. This study highlights how gender relationships were introduced, adopted, negotiated and practiced in Nelibewa from within the village.

## **Post-colonial Socio-Cultural Changes and Gender Transformation**

Post-colonial socio cultural changes such as opening the economy, increased education and employment opportunities for women, women's migration to foreign countries as domestic workers and the civil war caused major changes. As demonstrated, women led the production of various spaces, including public spaces, and became more empowered in both production and reproduction spaces

The production and reproduction of spaces do not have clear boundaries for women in Nelibewa. Yet the national level opportunities that women captured placed them clearly in the production space. This is an act of using their agency to transform their gender roles and get access to large production spaces. Apart from these major interventions that women used to empower themselves, women have always used the weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985) to negotiate daily matters. Women get into extramarital affairs, find local methods of abortion, earn their own dowry and find associations for social networking that create safe spaces to express themselves, and micro-financing systems to empower themselves and create access to social and spatial structures of the village.

## **Incompleteness of Gendered Social Structures in Nelibewa**

When it comes to daily activities, the villagers do not make decisions based on larger structures such as the patriarchy and Victorian values. The dynamics of making decisions at the grass-roots level are both complex and temporary. Women in Nelibewa negotiate daily matters in their own ways according to the situation and their personal identities. As discussed above, the character of women, caste, class, age and education matter in their interactions with society and space. Although the larger patriarchy favors men and subordinates women, mothers are more respected in families than fathers, most of the time. Mothers are considered as the Lord

Buddha of the household or only second to the Lord Buddha in the society. As women get older and get familiar with the husband's village, and the kids grow into full-fledged people, women become more powerful. Mothers and mothers-in-law take the role of implementing "the patriarchy" and carrying it on to the next generation. Mothers make sure that their sons get the dowry and an obedient wife. Mothers-in-law perform a key role in the familiarization process of their daughters-in-law to the village and its patriarchal structure. This strong character of women cannot be classified as matriarchy because it does not support the empowerment of women of the next generation, but the subordination of them in to the village's patriarchal structure. Although the patriarchy positions women as inferior, it is not the sole system that determines women's role and position. There are other power negotiations at the grass roots and personal interaction levels.

Girls in Nelibewa also try to increase their social power through earning their own dowry and getting married to well-to-do families. The main ambition of some women behind getting a good education and finding a job is also to find a "better" man to marry. They now demand more from the man they marry. This is also why some women leave the job after marriage; there is a higher unemployment rate among women in Sri Lanka, although a larger percentage of women get university education compared to men. This may be a patriarchal value, but is consciously practiced by women. This is also an example of how women utilize the tools that are used to oppress them to empower themselves: a weapon of the weak.

By providing a dowry, women earn more power to handle the patriarchal family unit in the husband's village. In practice, this has better positioned them than their parents giving a dowry (and the girl). When a woman earns a dowry for herself, she is more confident and receives more respect from the "host" family. However, it is the continuation of a practice that subordinates woman. Although redefined and the woman is more empowered, this practice maintains the subordination to a larger degree.

However, the dowry cannot be considered traditional. Also, it cannot be included completely within the traditional structures of patriarchy but they are also a part of the larger discourse of patriarchy. Women employ the same tools to gain more power within the structure. Yet they do not challenge the structure as such.

## **Changing Gender Roles and the Women's Empowerment**

The fact that women are creating a more powerful role for themselves in domestic spaces is understood by both men and women of all ages in Nelibewa. Mothers are more responsible for children's education and financial management in the household. Funding for more than fifty percent of the modern houses in the village was provided by women, mostly by those who migrated to the Middle East as domestic workers. Funding for more than fifty percent of the motor vehicles in the village is also provided by women who went abroad or worked in factories. Stories presented in the thesis illustrate that the financial and social empowerment of women have caused changes in traditional gender roles within domestic spaces somewhat glaringly where women have become the breadwinners of their families, a role until recently assigned to men. Women support families with the finances and perform household chores at the same time. In a way, the patriarchy is overturned; yet it is done within the patriarchy, supporting the man and the family structure.

The socio-cultural system in the village is designed in a way that women's presence is highly required in the acts and spaces of reproduction. When production spaces –such as farms-- were also within the village, prior to colonialism, women could work in both production and reproduction spaces. After colonial and capitalist urbanization and the incorporation of villages into the capitalist system, the production centers were concentrated in urban areas away from the village. Later, employment opportunities outside the country also emerged, but



this was soon dominated by women. As a country in the periphery of the world-system, most of the economic activities that opened up in Sri Lanka were for cheap female labor. More women received employment opportunities outside the village. This created a new separation and distance between production and reproduction spaces.

Women in Nelibewa found employment an opportunity to financially empower their families. Almost all of them I interviewed thought of their families before themselves, but the process empowered them as well. Today, more than fifty percent of women in the village are employed in some kind of paid work. Some of them work as domestic workers in the Middle East. The others work as factory workers, laborers in poultry farms and bakeries, shop keepers and some are self-employed.

Some of the jobs have created short- and long-term absences of women in the village, requiring changes in gender roles, especially with mothers being absent from the household. Some men in the village are not capable of familiarizing to these new domestic roles as discussed in Chapter 4. This creates tensions within the socio-cultural structure of the village, including domestic violence, child labor, child abuse and child marriages, chronic alcoholism among men and the mismanagement of finances. Outsiders can only see these tensions that affect existing structures. While such issues exist, this thesis demonstrates that there is a much stronger and larger process of feminizing the village, has taken place i.e. women have gained more power.

To overlook this too is patriarchal. There are urban middle class social movements and even political agendas and programs of left-wing political parties in Sri Lanka to solve these domestic issues caused by women's absence from the home. In 2015 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a left-wing political party, suggested the abolition of the dowry system (*Daily Mirror*, 2015). There are movements and protests to abolish the foreign employment opportunities for women as domestic workers in the Middle East. These protests became common after two recent incidents of execution of domestic workers and continuous incidents of

harassment that Sri Lankan domestic workers report in Middle Eastern countries. These movements demand the government to not send “our women” to the Middle East. Although they have good intentions, and want to protect women from abuse and exploitation, these movements do not include the voice of the women who go abroad. This thesis brings out the voices and stories of these women.

Stories from Nelibewa show that women’s empowerment does not have to be given to local women by outsiders, i.e., politicians or urban middle-class social movements, but is produced from within. For example, women get self-empowered by going out of the village and reflectively looking back at their own lives in the village, especially from a new social and economic position that they have achieved in a different cultural and social context. They materialize the economic value of work that they perform at home on a daily basis; they realized that they can get paid for the same tasks at home that they do at the master’s house in the Middle East. Yet it provides them with more self-dignity, social recognition, ability to travel to other places and countries and financial independence.

These add to their experience of empowerment, as is or otherwise. This questions the mainstream ideas about rural women propagated through the media and urban social movements. These social movements identify women as an oppressed group within the patriarchal system, but within the system women as individuals have found their own ways of dealing with it. They have transformed their victimhood to an active agent of empowerment (see Perera 2016). Domestic work abroad is considered oppressive for women and an exploitation of their labor by outsiders. Yet the women in Nelibewa see the tradeoffs of the disadvantages of migration; they see other benefits that they can get from working abroad as domestic workers, such as financial independence, enjoying the freedom from the structures (including the patriarchy) that subjects them when in Sri Lanka. That may be more liberating than doing the same work at the husband’s or the mother-in-law’s house.

## **Spaces are Gendered and the Production of Space is a Gendered Process**

Gender is important for planning because spaces are gendered and the production of space is a gendered process. More so, planners should focus on the issue that our cities are, by default, designed for a generic user who is male. It is important that we consider how to make spaces inclusive and friendly for female users. Women, among other actors in communities, play an important role in producing, transforming, modernizing and redefining society, culture, and spaces in urban and rural areas. This transformation is evident in Nelibewa, as exposed in this thesis. Planners can learn, accommodate, and enable such processes.

## **Modernization is Locally Produced**

Spaces in Nelibewa are locally produced with very little intervention from government or other non-governmental planning and development support. This is very common across rural Sri Lanka. Yet places are modernizing and the modernization process is locally produced. Women in Sri Lanka have always played an important role in the production of space. They grow up in different spaces in the birth-village and, after marriage, move to their husbands' villages. While they familiarize space in their birth-villages, once they move, they hybridize and transform spaces in the new home-village; they adapt spaces by changing both the space and themselves during the familiarization process. As mothers are considered the agents of culture in the village, women also transfer the culture to the next generation. As evident in this thesis, they do not simply stay at home and transfer a passive culture; they transform themselves and thereby transform the whole village and the next generation. The issue is the invisibility or the illegibility of this process to middle classes and researchers.

As gender roles in the village are changing and women are using the current socio-economic changes to become empowered, women get more access to the socio-spatial

organization of the village. The changing of gender roles also modifies the social structures of the village: more women participate in community organizations where important decisions about the village development are made; women create new social groups such as neighborhood organizations; women are highly involved in activities that educate their kids; they have found micro-finance groups; and work with banks to get financial support for their small entrepreneurships.

Women also cause changes to the spatial organization of the village by building modern houses, adding separate kitchens, getting pipe-borne water and electricity, changing the layout and the design of domestic spaces to facilitate their activities (such as building (women's) semi-public spaces), and buying a vehicle for the family, some enticing men to drive the vehicle. Women have opened shops and snack places in the village including at the *handiya* and the *pola*; this has converted these mainstream male places into public space that is inclusive for women and children. Women have taken the lead in making places safer and more inclusive for women and children by obtaining streetlights at the road intersections where women wait for buses and have restored a bus shelter.

### **Accommodating the Gender Changes in the Socio-cultural System of the Village**

The socio-cultural system of the village is transformed in order to accommodate the changing gender roles responding to the new needs and also the new influx of money, in turn facilitating the further empowerment of women. Rice mills, daycare centers, ready-made spices and prepared snacks and other changes in the socio-spatial organization frees women to be employed and involved in other social activities.

Despite these changes, women still have to carry out a double workload of being the breadwinner and housewife cum mother, both of new kinds. Amara is a mother of two children who works in a garment factory in Kuliypitiya, a regional center about 17 km from Nelibewa.

She works an 8-hour shift every day and still does all the household chores mostly by herself. She said that she has her mother-in-law's support in household work, but most of the other employed-women have chosen to live in a separate household as a nuclear family. So, they cannot get the support from their mothers-in-law. Amara said that most women, particularly working women, prefer independent nuclear families over traditional extended families, even though they do not get in-law's support in household work and childcare.

Women trade off the support from in-laws for privacy, independence and decision making privileges that women do not get within traditional extended-family units. This clearly illustrates that women have agency to choose what is more beneficial to them and there are no extreme solutions to the lack of women's rights; instead, on the ground, we see ground level negotiations. In a sense this also breaks the power of the mother-in-law constructed within a patriarchy, propagating patriarchy. It is unclear the extent to which this nuclear family setting and women's breadwinner role has caused changes in the patriarchy.

Dolores Hayden (2005) recommends that planners should create inclusive and supportive spaces for women within cities. Hayden recommends community cooking and childcare as good solutions for women to take part in the reproduction spaces, despite the biological roles of them within the reproduction spaces. Yet, in Nelibewa, community childcare and cooking are disappearing. However, at the same time, ordinary women create spaces supportive of their taking part in the production of social roles and spaces such as daycare centers for children, nanny services, rice and flour mills, ready-made spices, prepared food and catering services.

According to Amara, she is not only the main source of income for the family, but also created a self-employment opportunity for her husband Kumara by buying a three-wheeler. Kumara hires a three-wheeler taxi in the village. Domestic spaces are mostly run by women who are financially independent, although they have to do a heavier workload. Gunadasa and Bandara Menike mentioned that unlike in their days (referring to twenty to thirty years back),

women have become the heads of the families. Shriyatha, the chairman of the Dayaka Samithiya (Temple donor organization), said women actively participate in the discussions regarding the village development. Women also change spaces by opening snack and grocery shops and transforming the housing in the village to modern houses. Mothers play a bigger role in educating their children and take part in school development activities. Educated women from the village becoming administrative and development officers in the village has influenced the interaction of women with the spaces in the village by making decisions on road development, irrigation management for farming and community projects. Socialization and the social spaces of women are also changing; for example, women do not gather by the public well or to do community cooking as before, but gather in village houses or community halls for the meetings of their neighborhood associations and micro-financial organizations that they have formed.

Even capitalism is changing its spaces and operation in ways that support changing gender roles and address the tensions these changing gender roles generate. The Free Trade Zones (FTZ) decentralized the capitalist factories to regional areas in order to tap into the cheap female labor force. As discussed above, capitalist factories also provide transport services between the villages and factories. The establishment of garment factories in the region and the provision of transportation made it easy for women to travel to work and back every day and also to save time and energy (that would have been spent on public transportation) to perform household work. This illustrates that changing gender roles also influenced capitalist industries to make spaces more attractive to women within the existing patriarchal structure.

Patriarchy is changing and getting reshaped everyday with women negotiating the socio-spatial organization. As women find more freedom to enter the “mainstream” society and space, and become financially independent, socially involved with higher education and have better employment opportunities, traditional gender roles cannot function the same way. This creates tension in the patriarchal structures. This does not mean that the patriarchal structure is disappearing, but it gets new shapes and forms.

## **The Shape and the Definition of Patriarchy is not Stable**

This study highlights that there is no one stable definition of patriarchy, but it changes with many other social, spatial and temporal dimensions. The system is so hegemonic that the oppressed, women used to continue/reproduce the oppressive system, accepting the small privileges that the system offers them, compared to the other women in the same system. For example, mothers-in-law could use their privilege as mothers of men and elderly women with more experience in the village to oppress younger women and tame them to the patriarchal system, or women in rich and high-caste families could oppress the poor and low-caste women. This patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) among the village women illustrates the power negotiations among individual women to uphold their own privileges, but indirectly benefit the continuity of the patriarchy.

## **Spatial Transformation**

As women become more financially independent and socially empowered with employment and education opportunities within and outside the village, they not only try to survive but make changes in the gender roles. This research demonstrates that these changes provoke the spatial transformation.

Women are producing new social spheres in the village such as neighborhood associations, getting involved in community organizations, and influencing the decision making in Nelibewa. At a basic level, women are producing new spaces and changing the existing spaces by physically adding new uses, new physical and spatial components and changing the meaning and how women use these spaces. As they respond to the socio-economic changes at the national and regional level, women have employed the changing gender roles to transform and modernize the village. Nelibewa is a translocality (Appadurai, 1995) which is in continuous

transition. Women play a huge role in the hybridizing, modernizing and transforming the spaces in the village, in other words feminizing the village.



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A hand-drawn sketch map on a piece of paper. The map depicts a river flowing from the top left towards the bottom right. On the right bank of the river, there is a large, irregularly shaped area divided into several rectangular sections, some of which are marked with 'X' symbols. To the right of this area is a small, rounded shape labeled 'ବୃକ୍ଷ' (Bṛkṣa). Below the main rectangular area, there is a label 'ମୃଦୁ' (Mṛdu) and 'ଘାଟ' (Ghaṭa). Further down the river, there is a label 'ଆଫିସ' (Aḥiṣa) and 'ଘାଟ' (Ghaṭa). On the left bank, there is a label 'ଘାଟ' (Ghaṭa) and 'ଘାଟ' (Ghaṭa). At the bottom left, there is a label 'ଘାଟ' (Ghaṭa) and 'ଘାଟ' (Ghaṭa). The map is drawn with simple lines and includes some handwritten text in Odia and English.



